

Unseen Beauty



Amity Thompson

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AMITY THOMPSON



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✿ Created with Vellum

For Dave
Who Saw me when I could not See myself

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CHAPTER 1

THE DAY MY LIFE CHANGED...

I halted at the drawing room's doorway, struck dumb by the scene before me.

A person. A *visible* person. I hadn't been hallucinating when I'd spotted him through the window, he and his horse befuddled as if they'd never seen a castle before. And I'd guessed right that he'd been led inside. What I didn't expect was for him to be brought *here*, to Master's favorite room. What fool had given those orders? The stranger sat in Master's wing-backed chair, gaping in awe as his sopping cloak floated through the air to hang itself by the fire. A giggle came from behind me—a tea-cart rattled past and into the drawing room.

The air vibrated with voices. I Sensed, and took a step back. At least a dozen other servants bordered the room; curious servants, like me, all giddy from the existence of an outsider and from the threat of being caught away from their duties. The stranger didn't notice the buzzing whispers, but his eyes widened as the teapot rose, seemingly by itself, into the air to pour.

I Sensed again. Most of the servants were strangers to me; East Wing people, most likely. But there, in the corner... I grinned as I recognized Marie's presence. We'd met during our floor-scrubber days and had managed to stay best friends when assigned to opposite wings. Marie tended to collect reliable gossip, and so I made my way across the room to her, dodging furniture and grateful the enchantment kept us invisible folk from colliding.

"What is everyone thinking?" I said, once I reached the corner where I'd felt her. She'd tucked herself behind a statue, as if hiding, which was pointless. "Did Master say to treat the visitor as if he were a prince?"

"I don't know." I wondered if she were wringing her hands; Marie did that often enough. "I stopped by the kitchens. Hugh couldn't come. Cook's in a frightful state, and everyone is scrambling to make supper."

"He is to be treated as a guest, then." Marie's beau overheard everything, being overlooked as a lowly kitchen scrubber. I glanced back at the man. He looked less bedraggled, in front of the small fire, sipping tea. Sunshine streamed from the open window to glint off his balding head. "Look at him, settling in as if at home. He has no idea. But if he's here, then Madame or Lord Antoine must have allowed it, and they would surely ask Master first. Right?"

"Right," Marie said. She sounded as certain as I did, which was not at all. "How long has it been? Since last time. Perhaps he's changed."

I snorted. If anything, Master was predictable. Predictably disagreeable. He'd frightened the previous guest away after she'd stayed five days. "The first six years didn't change Master. What's three more?"

"I'm sure he learned something."

Ah, Marie. Always looking for the positive. Always, always a better person than I.

I stiffened. The buzz of whispers rose to a drone as more servants crowded in. Yet, behind it all, came a purposeful jingle of metal.

“Gracious!” The sharp voice of the Lady of the Keys cut through the murmurs. The smart servants cringed at her tone. No one in their right mind angered Madame. “What are all of you doing here? Back to your posts! I do not care if the visitor cannot hear you. All this chattering is making quite a breeze. Look at him, twitching like a nervous mouse. Away with you! Bertram, you stay.”

Envy for Bertram slammed into me as I scurried with countless others to flee. I’d never spoken to him, for he was an upper footman: high enough to personally wait on the guest, thus an extra son of the nobility, or the son of a wealthy merchant. The respectable servants—the cupbearer and servers and the like—were all of that stock. Marie and I... We’d seen all we’d be able to see.

“Marie,” the Lady of the Keys snapped as we hurried past her to a door. Madame always snapped, even when she whispered, but this time her snapping held anxiety. “The bedroom in the East Wing. The Green Room. Go prepare it.”

“He’s to spend the night?” Marie said. Not quite a question, more a confirmation. She was good at that.

“I will not have him out in that blizzard, no matter what His Highness says. Now quit your dillydallying.”

“Yes, Madame.” Somehow Marie found my hand and pulled me to the hallway. She halted, and I smacked right into her back. Usually the enchantment kept us from colliding, but I guess it didn’t work if one was already pulling the other along.

“What—” I began to protest.

Then I saw.

We weren’t in the servants’ hallway. In her haste, Marie had pulled me several feet into the main corridor. Someone had yanked the heavy curtains across the windows to block the sun. I squinted to see through the shadows that consumed the hallway.

Yet shadows no longer hindered us. We clearly saw him crouched in the darkness itself: a hunched, misshapen form. His heat flowed down the hallway and snaked around our bare ankles, our arms.

I trembled as his breath rasped in his throat. It was not the rasping of an old man, but instead the scraping of air against human vocal cords, changed into something other. He growled; not at us but at the open door behind us. The door to *his* room, to *his* belongings, to the attention usually given to *him*.

I dropped to a curtsy, as did Marie. Even if he couldn’t see our movements, he could hear the swish of fabric from our skirts. Master possessed senses even more enchanted than our own. The magic gave him power as well. Without seeming to concentrate he knew our exact location in a room, and he could Summon and send us at whim.

“He dares,” Master said, his rumbling growl so low pitched that I suspected he spoke to himself. Marie and I stayed frozen, heads bowed. “This place. Cursed. He not see? Why come, remind us...”

Of what we lost? My jaw muscles tensed, but I still did not move. Nor did I answer. I had never served him directly, but the upper parlormaid made it clear that the likes of me should never address the likes of him. Only titled people spoke to the prince. He kept a chasm between himself and us lessers, despite most of the nobility gone or asleep. Master preferred silence over talking to us.

His growling grew louder, and my knees melted at the sound. I dared not run for fear of unleashing his famous temper. He'd destroy everything in the hallway, and in the aftermath, I'd be the one punished, forced to fit shard after shard together so the magic could return each object to flawless condition.

Beside me, Marie shook like the possessed. I squeezed her hand and prayed she wouldn't whimper. He'd smash the bench near him and she'd sob, angering him further and making him roar.

Something snapped inside me. Marie was sweetness itself, and she didn't deserve to be scared out of her wits. Master's temper may be legendary, but I'd be damned if he made her cry.

"Do we have your permission to leave?" I found myself saying. Worse, I had covered my fear with haughty irritation.

Marie made a strangled noise in her throat.

The shadowy form turned to me, and with my blessed eyesight, I saw the tips of fangs glinting as the rest of his mouth turned downward, exposing more carnivorous teeth. Master's claws tightened, bringing popping sounds from the rug. His knobbly eyebrows lowered and he growled low.

Blood drained from my face. *What have I done?* He could rip me apart. I remembered when Charles the butcher had tried to kill himself that first year, and oh, how he'd screamed for days while his body melded itself back together. I'd never heard of Master mauling a servant, but I didn't want to be the first.

"Forgive me, Master." I lowered my eyes, in case he could tell that I had been gaping at him as a child gapes at circus freaks.

"Name?" He spat the word as if the absence of true lips made speaking near impossible.

My heart leaped into my mouth, as if it could keep me from answering. Names made people exist, and I didn't want this monster to remember me. "Claudette, Master."

He sniffed the air, sounding like one of the pigs, only more wrong. And much more dangerous. "Polish. Floors?"

"No, Master. Parlormaid." I rushed to explain. "Polish for the piano in the West Wing. The Harmony Room."

His expression twisted. At that moment, the jangle of keys entered the hallway. Madame gasped, at our predicament or her own I did not know. I did not even know if she Sensed us.

Master's rage shifted to the new presence. "Lady Marguerite. Told you. Send him away."

I didn't dare breathe, and Marie leaned against me as if trying not to faint.

To our right came the rustle of fabric and keys as Madame smoothed her apron. "Yes." She didn't snap, and her tone was pained. "But, Highness, if I can feel the storm, then it must be terrible. He will die out there."

A grunt. "Will talk of wealth. Or see me, and hunters come and—"

"I will not let him die," Madame said. I dared to exhale, for the sharp edge to her voice had returned. "Lord Antoine shares my apprehension."

"This *my* castle," Master said. "I do not want him. I want peace. I want—I want—I *order* you—"

"No." She said it with conviction, but almost imperceptible breezes told me she shook as she said the word. The air grew tense, like before a lightning strike, and Master's breath heaved into his lungs. More threads in the rug snapped. "It is not about what you want." Madame lowered her voice to a whisper. "You know that."

Master snarled and whipped around. His cape nearly hit my face. He bounded away down the hallway, on all fours, roaring behind him, "One night!"

From inside the drawing room, a man whimpered.

Madame sighed in relief. Scraping sounds, as if she leaned against the wall. Then a sudden jangle as she straightened. "Marie? Claudette? You have been here this entire time?"

"Forgive us, Madame," we both rushed to say.

"Never mind. Did I not give you a task, Marie? Get to it! I must soothe our guest."

Marie and I fled, darting at our first chance into a passage that linked to the plain, cramped servants' hallways. Even then we rushed in silence, first down to the laundry in the castle's bowels for supplies and sheets, then up three flights of stairs. After that, I became lost in the East Wing's twists and turns. Marie brought us out into a minor hallway, a few steps from the Green Room.

I clicked the door closed behind us as Marie drew aside the curtains to let in the afternoon light. Plumes of dust exploded. Marie coughed, and the window latch groaned. With another cough the pane pushed open, the curtains shook again, and more dust flew.

I sneezed, rubbing my eyes. No wonder Marie had grabbed my hand, and Madame had not protested. Large cloths protected the bulky pieces of furniture, but removing them would create similar dust clouds. There were countless items not covered, and the rugs... We had a lot of work. I hoped the fresh air would remove the musty smell before the guest went to bed.

"Why this room?" I asked, as I readied a feather duster for battle. "This can't be one you clean every day."

"It's not. I only clean the smallest rooms up here." Downstairs, I knew, she cleaned a few of the upper servants' rooms as well. "No one is awake to clean these nicer rooms."

We fell into solemn silence at that. On the day of the curse, all of the castle's visitors had vanished. Not turned invisible, but simply gone. The nobility who lived in the castle had remained, turned invisible like us, but they also had fallen into an endless sleep. Their personal servants, the same. Every servant who dealt with the outside world, every person who wasn't necessary. A single prince didn't need an army of servants to pick up after him.

Yet I'm still awake. I'd wondered about that often. Nearly all of the servants in the West Wing—the royal wing—slept, and I was far from needed. Hardly anyone had used my rooms before the curse. The best explanation I'd come up with was that Sibyla had overlooked me.

Marie and I began our work in the silence, pausing only to sneeze or cough. Once we'd knocked all the dust to the floors, Marie hauled the rugs away for another servant to clobber. I pulled a tin of polish from my pocket, paused, and smiled. One minute, nothing. Then... aha! Floating tin. Back into pocket. Gone! I'd done that often, in the early days. Appear-disappear. Appear-disappear.

The door clicked. In a rush, I flipped open the tin's lid and dabbed the gunk inside with a cloth.

A log from beside the fireplace lifted, paused, sank back down.

Marie spoke. "Claudette. Why did you speak to Master so? You are not..." She swallowed. "You are not unwell?"

I grimaced. "I'm well." She'd seen me playing with the tin. She had the right to worry about me going crazy. Charles still tried suicide every few years, hoping the enchantment may have weakened. It hadn't. I began to rub at an armchair, but

Marie didn't move. Finally, I sighed. "Truly. I am fine. I don't know what happened back there. I got angry, I guess."

"He's not Robert."

My teeth clacked together at my ex-beau's name. Robert had lost interest in me the moment my cleavage had turned invisible.

"You don't pick fights with Master," Marie continued.

"I know. I was stupid." The oak began to transform from dull to gleaming, so I moved to a new section with vigor. "He scared you."

"I was fine. I've been blustered at before." The log tumbled into the fireplace. Someone else would light it after dark. "You don't challenge them, Claudette."

But the Lady of the Keys had defied Master. And won. *It is not about what you want*, she had said. "Do you think she knows? Madame? About the curse. About whatever Master did."

Marie snorted. "She knows everything else." The Lady of the Keys saw to the housekeeping and the female servants while Lord Antoine, the Lord of Accounts, saw to the finances and the men. Between the two of them, they practically ran the castle. A smart servant did not whisper behind their backs unless they trusted their friend.

"Do you think Master asked something of Her?" I did not need to clarify *Her*. We both knew I meant the fairy Sibyla. Few spoke the name. We had enough bad luck already. "Rudely? I bet he was rude."

"Perhaps." A dark green coverlet lifted from the bed.

"Or maybe he didn't want to give her shelter. Fairies do that, right?" I moved on to a table. "She disguised herself as a hag and offered him, I don't know, a flower or a kind word in exchange for shelter."

"In the summer?"

She made a good point. The weather had been fair that day. Like it was always fair now.

Marie spread out a sheet. "It doesn't matter what happened. It happened. That's that. It's not our place to know why."

But I *wanted* to know. The curiosity burned in me, although Marie was perfectly right. His world and our world did not overlap. The uppers drilled it into us the day we entered service.

"It is our place," I said, replacing a vase upon the table, hard. A crack appeared, and I watched the porcelain heal before my eyes. *Like Charles*.

"Claudette, please. Not this again."

"The visitor will break the spell." I sounded desperate, maybe a little insane. "The last one, that lady, she went wrong somehow but this one..."

Marie sighed. "Light those candles."

"Right." The visitor couldn't see in low light as we could, and the Green Room's window faced north. It'd be dim soon enough. I fumbled in some drawers, looking for matches. "If Madame knows what happened, maybe her words meant —"

"You were there. There's a blizzard outside the wall. She didn't want the man to die. Quit looking for—"

"Hope?"

Marie fluffed a pillow with more force than necessary. I finally found the matches and lit the candles.

We said nothing as we finished the room. I knew she was angry at me. I was angry with me. In the beginning, all of us had tried to break the curse. The superstitious had consulted chicken bones, and the religious had exasperated the

chaplain with prayers. As one year became two, then five, then seven, it felt as if nothing would ever change. Except it must. Somehow.

Somehow we all knew Sibyla would return during the tenth year. The judgment year.

This year.

None of us knew why we were being judged, nor the final punishment.

Marie broke the silence. "I must go."

"Oh?"

"Madame is calling me."

Jealousy flared in my stomach. Madame had never Summoned me for anything. "Answer her. I should get back to my duties." My rooms were to be cleaned, in case Master wanted them.

I lingered after Marie had gone. The Green Room had remembered its past. No longer did dust and cloths enshroud its spirit. Oak gleamed like warm honey in the candlelight. The dark greens of the fabrics invited the guest, the pillows fluffed until they swelled with dreams. Evening breezes scented the room with lilac, and oh, how I hated to leave. I stood in the past, in a life from before. Never mind it wasn't the life I had lived. It was a *life*.

I passed our guest, on my way back. I hadn't felt like taking the servants' stairs; they were steep and narrow and difficult to maneuver with my short leg. Instead, I took advantage of invisibility by using the halls meant for the folk above me.

The man followed a floating candle, but I didn't bother to Sense the privileged servant who led him. Pink warmth had entered the man's cheeks. He studied his surroundings not with awe—that he reserved for the floating candle—but with appraisal. With nods of appreciation. He muttered under his breath, identifying works of art, the century they came from, the artisan who made them. He was a man of wealth, then, despite his tanned skin and worn clothing. A man of wealth fallen on hard times.

As I passed, I noticed something for the first time: I cast no shadow.

The West Wing felt cold and empty after the bustle of the East.

The West Wing. *His* wing. The wing for royalty and close friends. The wing nearly abandoned.

I returned to my work. Alone.

CHAPTER 2

Grey dawn filtered through a gap between the heavy curtains. I jerked awake and cursed as my neck cramped. I rubbed it while I shifted in the chair. Enormous bare desk, a few wooden chairs, a large portrait of the elderly king. The Morning Room. Not the servant quarters where I shared a narrow bed with a scullery maid.

I remembered now. After helping Marie with the Green Room, I'd finished my own tasks and, much past midnight, sat down to rest.

If I just stay here, what's the worst that will happen? A scolding? A skipped meal?

A restless pressure formed in my chest, an uneasy feeling that developed every time I thought of shirking my duties. Cleaning filled the time. Even if...

Even if it never mattered.

I stretched, giving my neck one last halfhearted rub, and gathered my cleaning cloths. Then I frowned. My stomach felt strange. Hungry? I'd woken late, but we servants always worked several hours before we broke our fast. By the sunlight's angle, I should still have an hour or so before my usual meal.

The sensation grew stronger, a knotting across my middle. Then, tugging. As if someone had anchored a rope around me and now pulled.

"Summons!" I cried aloud. I dropped the cloths on the floor and darted around the desk. That *had* to be the feeling. Someone wanted me.

Because I hadn't gone to bed while there was a visitor in the castle?

My enthusiasm evaporated. Invisibility made mischief easy, and the maid above me called me Gimpy and loved to get me into trouble.

The tug came again. I cracked open the servants' door, which was half-disguised by the room's paneling. With slow steps, I made my way down the servants' hall. Occasional puffs of air fluttered my hair and clothes as others went about their duties, the magic keeping us from colliding.

Halfway to the kitchens, the tug angled upward, toward the East Wing's second floor.

Elation returned. Madame wouldn't scold me in the East Wing. In nine years, she'd barely said more than a handful of words to me. Before that, she'd only bothered to make me a parlormaid because I was getting awfully old to be a floor drudge. It'd taken all this time for her to notice that my work was as good as the other maids', if not better.

I changed to a run.

"There you are," the Lady of the Keys said as I hurried into the Green Room.

"Forgive me, Madame," I said in a rush. "I have never felt—"

"Never mind. Reynaud has not finished breakfast, so there is time."

Madame's voice came from the corner of the room, near the door, behind me. Over by the open window, the visitor sipped his tea as he listened to birdsong. The remains of a sweet roll and a few bites of ham sat on his plate. He sighed; a happy sound. I realized, dimly, that I remembered him with stooped shoulders, almost as if he carried a terrible burden. Now he sat straight and hummed an upbeat tune.

"Come to me," Madame said. I turned and approached, Sensing as I did so. One servant stood beside the man—*Reynaud*—but other than him, there was no one else. Even so, Madame lowered her voice to a whisper. "I have a task for you. Do you know the current year of the curse?"

"The ninth," I said without hesitation. Everyone knew.

"The ninetieth."

I couldn't have heard her right. "What?"

The sound of starched cloth crinkling—Madame's collar—as she nodded. "Time does not flow the same outside these walls. Over ninety years have passed, though to us it's been but nine. When we reach our first century, the judgment will come."

I tried to comprehend this. The castle no longer had seasons. Just warm, fair weather. If Sibyla could control the sky, why not slow time as well?

"But..." My conscience, sounding like Marie in my head, warned not to ask questions. I didn't listen. "But what of His Majesty, in the capitol? And—"

"Not our concern," Madame said. A new presence entered the room and began to transfer food from a basket into a pack upon the bed. Reynaud murmured appreciation. Madame lowered her voice to a whisper. "We must act quickly if we are to end the curse."

The curse. That man, calmly sipping his tea, he *was* the one who could free us. Excitement filled my throat, sweet and thick. "What must I do?"

"Shh! His Highness is letting Reynaud leave. You must prevent him from doing so."

I frowned as the pack's flap closed. "Why are you giving him food for a journey, then? How am I to keep him from leaving if he's encouraged to do so?"

"Think, girl. If His Highness approaches Reynaud and asks him to stay..." Madame didn't need to finish. Reynaud would run away, screaming. "If, however, Reynaud were caught with something of value upon his person, something from the castle... Well. That is a different situation altogether."

I blinked, wishing I could see Madame's expression. Her voice sounded serious. "You want me to get him to steal. From Master."

"And if he will not, plant an object upon Reynaud's person. Without him or anyone else knowing."

She sounded as if the idea was utterly reasonable.

"But Master will kill him!"

"Shush! He will not. I will stay his hand. Besides, he knows better than all of us the cost of failure."

Reynaud put down his cup and stretched with a small smile. He must have thought himself fortunate for finding a benevolent, enchanted castle during a blizzard.

My hands went cold and clammy. "Why me?"

"His Highness would suspect Antoine or me, and we must stay near him. He does not know you exist."

She didn't know about the night before, when I had talked back to him. She didn't know how her arrival had prevented goodness knows what from happening.

"I cannot," I heard myself say. All my elation had hardened into something like fear, for Reynaud and for myself. "This man, Reynaud, he has done nothing. Nothing but be lost."

"You and I did nothing, but that despicable fairy cursed us all the same. Claudette, I order you to do this." Madame's words seemed to congeal around me, forming an impenetrable wall around my will. A Command. The others said that when Master did it, they could not even protest.

The Lady of the Keys was not Master. I took a deep breath, battling the Command strengthened by Sibyla's enchantment. The magic half-suffocated me, but I managed to speak. "I will not. He has not taken anything so far. I will not trick a good man into—"

"If you do not do this, then you, as much as His Highness, are to blame for what happens to this castle." Reynaud stood and reached for the pack. "You will incriminate Reynaud before he reaches the gate."

I gasped at the weight of her words. Keys jangled, and Madame was through the doorway, calling for this servant to light candles to show the man's path out of the castle, and that servant to send word to the stables. She called for the servant still in the room with me, and he scurried away.

I was alone with our guest.

How dare she! That latrine-swilling...

I gritted my teeth against the urge to shout loud enough for the entire castle to hear. Nobility. All of them thought they could control us. I was an orphaned, gimp-legged nobody who should be *thrilled* to risk everything for the chance to please an upper.

Madame might know my history, but she didn't know *me* at all.

I won't do it.

Reynaud strapped on the pack.

I won't. She can use me, but I refuse to use him.

The flap hadn't been properly buckled. I looked away.

I'm not slipping anything into...

That blown glass figure, small as my hand, would fit perfectly.

I won't. I just won't.

Each defiant thought made it harder to breathe. The Command's weight crushed against me. I staggered, falling against the wall, nearly knocking over a small side table. Reynaud began to whistle, and he left the room.

I'd hoped the pressure would lift with his leaving, but it didn't. *I have no choice.* The admission brought bile to my throat, and it allowed me to stand on my own, without the wall. As I made the decision to follow him, the pressure lifted a little more, and a little more. A step. Another. Every step, broken pride, trailing a doomed man.

In the hallway, the candle-bearer lit candles a little ahead of Reynaud, enough to clearly mark the path to the castle's foyer. Each time Reynaud passed an open doorway, I heard the halting of brushes or swishes or thumps. Servants, noticing him. Servants, who would surely see a marble carving float into his pack. I'd squandered my best chance.

I can't follow him all the way to the front door. Here, I could keep to the rugs that covered the center of the hallway. The foyer, polished marble. Reynaud couldn't hear my footsteps, but all of the castle could. They'd hear the steps and Sense to see who trailed after the visible man, and those who didn't know me personally would know my identity regardless. Only one of us had uneven steps. While I was pretty good at masking it, I was not perfect.

The weight on my chest increased.

Stop it. I'm thinking.

I caught sight of a thin line in the wall. I'd have to take another way.

While Reynaud turned the corner to the main hallway, I ducked through the servant's door. I took the narrow steps too fast, cursing as I tumbled down several. The enchantment kept me from colliding into another servant at the last moment. I only hoped he or she didn't bother to identify.

It took a few guesses and wrong turns before I stepped, blinking, into sunlight. Rosemary and thyme clogged the air. The kitchen gardens. Which meant the foyer was...

I'd have to run around an entire wing.

I cursed and tested the Command. Still there. I began to run, hoping I guessed Reynaud's route correctly.

Vegetables gave way to bushes, which gave way to trellised gazebos and flowerbeds. My breath heaved in my chest, and the pressure of the Command mingled with the need for air. Finally, I rounded one corner of the West Wing, and then the other. I halted, panting, and Sensed as far as I could.

There, near the castle's entrance. I usually couldn't Sense nearly so far, but all of the castle's magic centered on him. My eyesight pierced the shadows, and I saw Master lurking between two shrubs, glaring at Reynaud as he rode away from the castle. Reynaud didn't notice, but the horse's steps were quick, strained. It veered off the main path. Away from Master's corner. A bit of luck for me, that. I wouldn't have to run too hard to intercept him. I'd only need to keep Reynaud from seeing...

"Idiot," I muttered under my breath. How quickly invisibility escapes one's mind.

I went along, Sensing as I did so. No servants now, not even gardeners. *Lord Antoine must have ordered them all inside.* Let the poor guest leave in peace. Let him think it all a dream.

A dream I'm to turn into a nightmare.

But how? I hadn't thought to grab a trinket from inside, and it was too late to go back. I halted by a cluster of lilac bushes, next to the path. How much farther was the gate? I'd never paid much attention before.

What happens if he passes through the gate without me satisfying Madame's Command?

I shuddered.

"Think, Claudette. There must be something out here."

Lilac. Gravel. Ornamental rock. Twig, if I snapped it from a bush. I glanced everywhere. Turned around. The path forked, one branch leading to a high wall covered with ivy. From an archway dripped pink and white.

I knew what Master prized.

CHAPTER 3

“No.” My skin went clammy, as if dunked in ice water on a humid day. If Reynaud took *that*—

The Command squeezed my chest. It’d work. I had to admit it. Taking such a thing, it would more than work. There was no greater treasure.

Reynaud rode closer. *Master will kill him if he dares touch it.* I sucked in air, but it did little good. The edges of my vision: little spots. If I resisted more, would I pass out? But then he’d leave and the Command...

I couldn’t help remembering it, that Madame had promised to keep Master’s temper in check. I couldn’t see how, though, since she was an older woman and human while he was a hulking monster. But she had promised.

Reynaud drew close enough for me to hear him.

“Shhh, Pippa. There’s nothing to fear.” His horse jerked her head to glance behind. Master followed at a distance, keeping to shadows, but not once did Reynaud twist to follow his mare’s gaze. “They’ll never believe me. I left for riches, find confiscated cargo, and on my way home I stay in a castle. It’s like out of some tale.”

He shook his head as if amused. The spots in my vision were beginning to meld together. Could I pass out? I hadn’t thought of a third option: that the enchantment would keep me half-suffocated until I gave in.

“I cannot believe you’re resisting this grass,” Reynaud said to Pippa. “Such lush grass in the dead of winter! I’ve never seen such magic. The gardens here are beautiful. Even more than—” He sniffed and rubbed his eye. “Seline would love them. Poor girl, she used to go outside five times a day, fussing over the roses. Shameful, that I couldn’t afford a single cutting. Maybe if I carve something extra fine, I can trade it for some seeds.”

Too perfect. I couldn’t handle the feeling of suffocation any longer. It was more action than thought, my rushing forward. My fingers rippled the lilac bush’s leaves, and the Command’s insistence drained away. My vision brightened as clouds obscured the sun.

“Forgive me,” I said, even though there was no one to hear.

The horse jerked her head toward the movement. The man did as well. A flicker of color caught his eye just past the bush, little dots of pink and white. A smile lit his face.

I had ended his happiness. He just didn’t know it yet.

“Look over there, Pippa.” The horse locked her knees, and he grunted as he tried to move her. “Fine. Stay here. I’ll be back.”

I followed him into the garden, grateful for his slow steps, as I also gaped. A high wall encircled the garden, shielding it from view, with only two entrances: the south, which we approached, and the east. Climbing roses of blush and white

hugged the entrance's archway, and inside scarlet roses snaked up pillars set at regular paces around the garden's perimeter. Bush after bush sagged with the weight of perfect blossoms. Every color dazzled the eye, from lavender to blood to buttercream, and the perfume hung so thick in the air it nearly made me drunk. Water trickled somewhere, soft and soothing, adding a freshness to the fragrance. I had entered an enchanted world, one that didn't know of furniture polish and ex-beaus and sore hips. A world of peace and beauty.

Reynaud halted when he saw the white marble statue in the center of the garden. The sweet-faced woman seemed to smile at him, her arms spread in welcome. Deep-green ivy covered her dress, and a tiny crown of yellow buds bloomed across her forehead. In each hand, she held the treasures of the kingdom: twin roses so deep a purple they were almost black, with petals veined in glittering gold.

According to myth, the kingdom would flourish as long as the flowers bloomed. Even when a former king built a new, stylish castle in the new capital to the north, he'd sent guards and gardeners alike to care for the royal roses here. Fashion, coins, and schemes might rule in the north, but the kingdom's heart lay in the statue's hands.

I'd never been one to believe myths. But that was before a fairy had turned me invisible. Before I'd seen the roses with my own eyes, their colors surreal and the gold veins like molten sunshine. I trembled at what I was to do.

There wasn't much time. Master would notice the lone horse. I ignored Reynaud's tears at seeing such beauty. I ignored his reverence. I tried my best not to think of him as a good man and approached the statue.

My invisible hands reached out, rustling the ivy. Reynaud gasped as the statue seemed to come alive, the foliage moving without a breeze. My hand gently caressed the yellow flowers on her crown, as if she nodded.

"I cannot," he whispered to the statue. "My lady, it is favor enough for you to allow me to cast my mortal eyes on such treasures."

I bit my lip. If Reynaud took a royal rose, Master's anger would be irrevocable. Touching it might be enough. I thought about plucking the flower myself and handing it to him, but I discarded the plan. Reynaud might mention the gift, and Master would know how a flower floated. I didn't know if I could bring myself to touch a rose, anyway.

I couldn't move the statue toward him, nor could I use my voice to make it speak. Then I remembered Madame's chiding words from the night before. All of our chatter combined had created a breeze strong enough for the guest to feel. I could stir the air. He wouldn't know to 'see' me, as he thought himself alone. But only if I moved quickly enough...

I swept my hand along the woman's right arm, past the rose, and sprinted toward him. Air clung to me and *whooshed*, carrying the delicate scent of the flower. I didn't dare slow as I neared him, hoping the enchantment would prevent me from colliding into him just as it kept me from knocking into other servants.

I ran through him.

Like a ghost.

I didn't have time to shudder. I whipped around and saw him inhale. His mouth parted slightly as his eyes glazed.

"Perhaps," Reynaud murmured. He took a step toward the statue, and I raced to repeat the action. I caressed the rose's soft petals this time, making it look as if it sighed. Once more, Reynaud inhaled. "I'd hate to anger you by refusing your offer..."

I froze as he stretched out his hand. The air—still except for where I'd stirred it—suddenly moved as the wind shifted. Upon it, something wild. Musky. Something mixed with cinnamon and velvet.

I sprinted through the eastern arch. Did I hear grass crunch? Had I imagined it? I ran harder, terror pumping through my veins. Master did not need to see me. He only needed to Sense, and he'd know. I was the true criminal, not Reynaud.

A roar rolled like thunder over the grounds. Under it, a scream from a man's throat. And in my chest, weight rising off like steam on a lake: the Command fulfilled.

Reynaud had taken the rose.

I fell to my knees. A fiery ache flared in my hip after running so much in one day. But what was an ache? *I have ruined him*. Droplets of water appeared and fell to the grass. My tears. Another roar echoed, and I prayed that Madame could stay Master's hand. Reynaud's body would not be able to piece itself together, as ours could.

It's quiet. Quiet, and without a man's bloody screams. Either he was already dead, or Madame had spoken truthfully.

A tear dripped off my nose. I caught it in my palm. Appear-disappear. My job had finished. I should return to the castle. Pick up my feather duster. Pretend all was normal. I pressed my forehead into the pristine gravel.

The guilt that gnawed at my stomach shifted. Sharpened. Tugged.

A Summons, from the direction of the Rose Garden. I brushed myself off with trembling hands, for a moment forgetting my appearance didn't matter. *He knows. He knows it was me. What will he do? He cannot kill me.*

But he could hurt me very, very badly.

The walk back seemed to take forever, my limp worse for all the running. But I didn't feel any pain; the fear squeezing my heart was too intense. Eventually I was there, in the Rose Garden.

Master's massive back blocked my view of the statue, but by the way he hunched before it, I knew that a rose was missing. I trembled as I saw him for the first time in daylight. The tips of his two horns glinted silver above shaggy brown hair that was too coarse to be human, yet too long to be fur. His head held more shadows for all the sunshine. I could not see his face, nor did I want to. He stood over six feet, even with his head bowed. A dark navy cloak made a mountain of his body. He barely moved, whether from remorse or anger I did not know.

"There she is," Madame said beside Master. She didn't sound upset in the least. In fact, she sounded almost pleased, if a bit impatient. I didn't see Reynaud, but I heard galloping hooves. "Claudette, dear, we have a task for you."

I bit back a retort. Hadn't I done enough?

Master stirred and turned toward me. I choked down a gasp. It looked as if someone had bashed in his foxlike snout with a club and as further insult ripped out his whiskers. Two small fangs—small in comparison to the rest of his head, that is—juttied over his lips. Heavy, lizardish brows arced above two very human, very blue eyes.

"Her?" he said, and I could not keep from noticing how his lips moved in a semi-normal way. More snorts; breathing from his mangled nose. "She will go?"

Go where?

"She will," Madame said, her voice full of certainty. "The castle will not miss her while she travels. She works in the West Wing parlors, and she is a smart girl. Claudette, you will accompany Reynaud to his home where he will say goodbye to his family, and with the magic His Highness gives you, you will bring a prisoner

back to the castle.”

Pressure from the new Command settled on me. I shuddered, wishing I could shake off the magic. So kind of Master, to let Reynaud return home for goodbyes. It didn’t match his reputation. “If Reynaud doesn’t want to come back?” I asked.

“Took it,” grunted Master. His claws sliced open the ground at his feet. His gaze found mine, and I took a step back. His eyes were so *human*. I lowered my gaze before I could read the emotions in them. I didn’t want to give feelings to a beast.

“Reynaud will fear the magic of this place,” came Madame’s voice, showing no doubt. “He understands there must be retribution for his deed.” I cringed. “But His Highness has offered up the possibility of a substitution.” Master turned away from us both. “Reynaud has a choice: return to the castle forever as His Highness’s prisoner, or pass the same fate to one of his *daughters*.”

I jerked. Madame did not use subtlety well. She’d never wanted Reynaud. This was her goal all along.

“No father would part with a daughter,” I said, then winced. My father had.

Master grunted again, this time with a bit of a moan. “Must.” He parted his cloak, revealing torn breeches and a grimy gray shirt. A clumsy paw found a pocket. “Hand. Your hand.”

I drew closer, leaving the meager comfort of the rosebushes. A bit of my trembling reached my voice. “In front of you, Master. Level with your waist.”

His arm stretched out, and I placed my palm under his fist, taking care not to touch him. Mortals outside the castle apparently couldn’t touch me, but I bet Master could. When I’d first come to the castle, six years before the curse, I’d heard of him striking servants during rages. He’d grown out of it as he’d become a man, they said, but the thought of the force behind his blow as a beast made my bowels quiver.

Master’s fist opened, revealing four elongated fingers and a bird talon for a thumb. A heavy silver ring landed in my palm. Warmth spilled from it into my skin.

“Four days,” he said. “Then use ring. Bring here. Not him.” His face contorted. “Daughter.”

So either Madame had gotten him to agree to this plan, or Master wanted a girl just as badly. The two previous visitors, both women, hadn’t broken the spell.

Why should I?

I stared at the silver circlet. Roses were etched into the band.

Why should I help you fix your mistake?

Because otherwise the rest of us are condemned as well, another part of me argued.

My jaw tensed. For the first time, true hatred began to seep into my bones. Hot and prickly, it filled my spine. *He doesn’t care about what happens to us. He just wants me to break the spell.*

“Fine,” I said as my fingers closed around the warm metal. The ring disappeared. Master growled at my tone: so low that if I hadn’t been hoping to anger him, I might not have heard. “At the end of four days, I bring someone back, using the ring. How do I do that?”

Master waved, and I skittered backward. “Put on. In forest. Twist once, while touching.”

I blinked. I could touch Reynaud?

Madame spoke. “There is one more thing. For the girl to come, she must come of her own accord. You cannot simply take her, or she won’t be able to approach the castle.”

I swallowed. I heard the edge of a threat in Madame's voice. Bring a girl, or else. Yet she hadn't made 'daughter' part of the Command to bring back a prisoner. Was that because Master stood there? My feeling that they disagreed grew stronger.

Master turned to look over his shoulder once more at his missing rose. The statue's long fingers looked eerie, empty like that. "Hurry. Almost at gate."

Now? I'm leaving now? Like this? "But yesterday Madame mentioned a blizzard."

His hands darted out and found my arms. I recoiled at the touch, but he didn't let go, his pads chafing against my skin and his talon thumb pricking my arm. He pulled me nearer to his face. Sparkles in my vision threatened to faint as his mouth opened, and I whimpered in fright as his jaw unhinged and revealed too many teeth. Thick, hot breath coiled around my face. It smelled of beef and cinnamon and... magic. I had never noticed the smell before, but now it bombarded my senses. The entire castle smelled like that: a tangy scent, light as the champagne I once nipped from a guest's discarded glass after a ball. It emanated from Master and clung to me as his breath settled on my skin.

He shoved me away, and I fell to the ground.

"Now go."

I scrambled to my feet and ran.

CHAPTER 4

A high stone wall encircled the castle grounds. I found Reynaud trembling upon his horse at the wrought-iron gate. I waited, looking at him as little as possible. Then Madame came, and a ring heavy with keys appeared. The largest key slid into the padlock on the gate. It groaned open, and the horse bolted through.

It took me almost two hours to catch up.

The snow didn't help. It swirled in thick clouds, more blowing than falling now, funneling onto the path where the wind could gust down. Fortunately, there were no forks in the road, or I would have lost them. But catch up I did, and I trailed behind like a wraith. I certainly felt like a wraith. If Reynaud looked behind him, he'd spot the outline of my body where flakes could not go. But he never did. He clung to Pippa, his face buried in her mane. The poor man barely moved as his horse picked her way over unseen roots and around spindly trees. I trudged behind as my clothing became sodden.

Master's breath had extended the castle's magic beyond the wall. We servants had long noted that temperature didn't bother us, but as it was usually fine weather at the castle, I'd never really thought too deeply about it. Now the winter's bite made my skin crawl, in an eerie way. I knew it to be cold—my mind insisted snow always felt cold—but my bare arms didn't even goosebump. I suspected the other benefits to the enchantment, like my ability to see in low light and to rapidly heal, would work as well.

I only wished Master's breath could take away the pain. My short leg groaned, after so much running. I'd become used to plush carpets and smooth floors, and the snow hid roots and rocks and uneven ground, though I tried to keep to the horse's tracks. Pippa plodded on steadily, and I began to hate the horse.

We traveled for two days of the precious four, me his silent shadow. Sometimes Pippa turned her head as if she knew I followed. Her breath whuffed little clouds of steam, but her muscles did not ripple in distress, and Reynaud noticed nothing.

The snow had stopped by the time we broke through the woods. My skin tingled as we stepped out from under the line of trees, as if I'd walked through cobwebs. Before us, bathed in moonlight, a cottage nestled in waist-high drifts. A warm yellow glow escaped through a partially open shutter. My stomach rumbled at the thought of food. I had only stolen tiny morsels from Reynaud's meals, when he had bothered to eat at all. But it'd have to wait. Pippa trotted toward a smaller structure nearby, likely the stables by the *maa* of a goat. I sighed and waited.

Finally. Reynaud emerged. I hopped into his tracks as he trudged to the cottage door. Just before he reached it, an exclamation sounded from the window. The door flew open, and Reynaud stumbled backward straight into me.

"It's you!" a woman said, before falling into ceaseless chatter. I shook myself as Reynaud stepped out of me and into the woman's arms. I did *not* like being stood in. Then I scurried, for they were slipping inside.

"Door's stuck," the woman said as it smacked into me. I yelped. People could pass through me, but objects they weren't wearing hit me smartly enough. She yanked it again, and this time I made it through before it slammed.

I blinked as I rubbed my arm where the door had struck me. A fire warmed the space. There was only one sconce on the plastered wall, but the room glowed gently after the moonlit whiteness outside. I felt a vague warmth from the hearth, just as the snow's cold had been barely a suggestion. The aroma of bean soup wafted from a kettle hanging just outside the fire. My stomach gurgled. I really, really hoped there'd be some left over. I suspected starvation wouldn't kill my enchanted self, but hunger did drive me batty. A second woman, with a child, sat at the table. As long as no one ate too much, I ought to get something.

"Poor Pappa, it's frigid out there," the chatterbox continued as she helped him out of his cloak and hung it on a peg. "Sopping wet, too." I glanced down. Snow had melted from my shoes and formed a dark muddying spot on the dirt floor. The pool narrowed before joining Reynaud's puddle. "You're lucky you didn't lose your way with all this snow. How did it go? Did you bring what I asked? Are—"

"Estelle, give Pappa a moment to catch his breath!" This from the other woman, several years older than the chatterbox, perhaps in her midtwenties. The child balancing on her knee looked... some age. I didn't know children well. Chubby hands battled for control of a spoon. "Pappa, sit."

She has an accent. Slight, but... Seeing his daughters, I realized Reynaud and his family weren't from my kingdom. His wrinkles and bald head had hidden it from me. The women's hair was too dark and wavy, their skin too olive. Reynaud's squint hid eyes rich and brown and sloped in the suggestion of a smile.

No wonder he had dared to enter our forest. He did not know better.

The younger woman, Estelle, pulled out one of the empty chairs at the table as she spoke. "We thought you'd arrive days ago."

"My dear, my dear," Reynaud said over and over as he sank into the seat. His gaze took in the room as if he had only just awakened.

"I wished you'd waited for spring," the older daughter said as she frowned. "You do not look well. Traveling in all this snow. Let me get you something to eat."

"Zara, my dear. If only I had been as practical as you." Reynaud sank deeper in his chair. Zara juggled the babe and fetched a bowl from a shelf.

"The ship?" Estelle said. She brought over a spare chair and leaned toward him. "Did it come? Did you find that silk I wanted?" The lines on Reynaud's forehead deepened. Zara ladled him some soup, but he made no move toward it when she set it in front of him. "Pappa?" Estelle said again, sounding unsure this time.

"It came," Reynaud said with a sigh. "The creditors got there first, and the magistrate wouldn't listen when I told him they falsified the accounts. I barely had enough for the journey home."

Estelle fingered her coarse skirt.

Zara patted her father's shoulder before sitting with her child. "Don't worry, Pappa. The inn did very well during the festivals, and I'm sure Mal will give you some money."

"Me, accept money? When I used to lend it?"

"Surely you can accept a gift from your son-in-law?"

He took a ragged breath and gazed sightlessly at the door that led outside, to Master's castle. "No matter. Our expenses are not what we thought." Zara opened

her mouth, puzzlement on her face, but he interrupted. "And where is my Seline?"

Estelle's jaw tightened. At that moment the door opened once more, and in came a bundled figure carrying a package. An exclamation of *Pappa!* sounded from under a muffler, and there was a flurry of movement as the cloak and muffler went to a peg and the package to the floor.

Reynaud stood with strength for perhaps the first time since taking the rose, all to hug his youngest daughter.

I stared, open-mouthed. Seline was my age, eighteen or nineteen, but compared to her I was an overused duster. Her lustrous black hair cascaded down her back in waves and her worn clothing accentuated a figure with full hips. Diamond-like tears dripped down her cheeks as her perfect lips formed a smile. I touched my own cheek, too aware that when I cried my face scrunched and blotched like an old tomato.

"Pappa!" Seline said again as she pulled back from the hug. "I told them not to worry. Perhaps the snow is not the sea, but you've always been the best navigator."

Reynaud squeezed her arms. "I am afraid, my daughter, I did not navigate so well this time."

"The shipment's gone," Estelle said.

Disappointment flitted across Seline's face, but she held her smile. "No matter. We'd rather have a Pappa over a shipful of gold, and what good are spices without decent fish to sprinkle them on?"

Reynaud did not smile. "I brought you a gift."

Estelle's teeth clacked together, but perhaps only my enhanced hearing caught it.

"You shouldn't have," Seline said. "I didn't ask for anything."

Of course she hadn't. My stomach, already uneasy from hunger, churned.

Reynaud's smile broke my heart. "You did not, little gem, but I remember how you loved your garden."

She exchanged a curious glance with Zara, who shrugged and rubbed the back of the almost-asleep babe nestled into her chest.

Reynaud gestured for his cloak, which Estelle brought him from the peg. The smell of beans wafting from the kettle made me positively ill now. Reynaud fumbled with the cloak, digging through folds of fabric. He found the pocket and the entire room gasped as he pulled out the rose. I did not gasp; I knew the cost.

The rose radiated beauty all the more in the simple hearthroom. The gold in its petals glinted in the firelight, and the purple deepened with shadows. The overpowering scent of beans had been conquered by perfume. I lowered onto a stool by the fire, hugging myself as if I could comfort my guilt away.

The color drained from Seline's face. "You shouldn't have. Such a thing must have cost—"

"I paid—" Reynaud brushed his eyes with the back of his hand. "I did not pay money for this."

"A trade?" asked Zara. The baby had wakened and reached uselessly for the flower. "How did you keep it alive, all the way from the coast?"

"A tale for a different night." He shoed away further protests. "I am hungry."

"Of course, Pappa," Estelle said. She snatched the now-cold soup and got him a new bowl. I noted where she set it, on a bench for prepping food, but I felt too ill to sneak some now.

Instead, I watched Seline get a cup from the shelves and fill it with water from a bucket. The blossom floated on the water, an exotic centerpiece for the humble table. Seline echoed my thoughts. "I have never seen anything like it. It deserves

crystal. Or gold. Did it come from Kstarlin? Or Averlka?"

"Later, Seline," Zara said as Estelle fussed over their hunched father. "Why don't we tell Pappa what he's missed? Mal's thinking of adding to the inn this spring."

The family fell into safe chatter, but I didn't pay close attention. It hurt too much. The fear and dread that flashed across Reynaud's face every few moments... I could tell that he did not expect to see new additions or spring gardens. He loved his family too much to condemn a daughter. He'd never tell them of the beast.

It'd be up to me to find a way to bring it about. The pressure to act, to do *something*, it pressed on me already. All of my hatred couldn't change the Command to bring back a prisoner, and Madame had been clear that it should not be him.

Estelle or Seline. I wouldn't take Zara, both a mother and a wife. I wished I knew what the young lady needed to *do* to break the spell. The gossip of the two women who'd found the castle before, it didn't give me many clues. Master had scared away the first, a peasant girl, as soon as she'd crossed the gate. The second, a noblewoman, had managed five days before Master had flown into a rage and frightened her away. The gossip didn't say what had made him upset either time.

Focus, Claudette. Estelle or Seline? By herself, Estelle's beauty could capture the heart of most men and spark jealousy in most women. That is, until Seline entered the room. Both clearly adored their father. But Estelle had a resentful temper and struck me as anxious. She was the type who would see the limp from my short leg and assume that I could do nothing of use. She didn't seem cruel—she would not tease me nor cast me from her sight—but she would smother me with pity and fill me with shame. A caretaker who congratulated herself on her tenderness.

Seline, however, was an encourager. I thought, perhaps, she would cry during her first days at the castle, but optimism radiated from her. She'd recover. The tilt of her head, the flow of her gestures, her smile; they all spoke of a love of life. The castle held little of that. Her inner light made me feel hope.

Hope. My heart, squeezed too tight. My breath, caught in my throat. Hope. That someday people could *see* me again. They'd see my gimpy walk, and I would dance with joy.

I made my choice, though I hadn't the foggiest idea of how to convince her to come. I prayed that with time would come inspiration.

It did not take long for Zara to leave with a bundled, sleeping babe. Reynaud slipped through one door to retire, the girls through the other. I waited agonizing moments, making sure they didn't return, and attacked the cold, forgotten soup. I tried not to dwell on the fact that I had now added thieving to my list of wrongs. Then I washed the bowl and curled up on the mat near the fire.

I pulled out the ring. It blinked into existence with a glint. Firelight filled the etched grooves, making the silver roses molten gold.

If Reynaud does not tell his story in the morning, I'll have to find a way to make him. I supposed I could throw things about the room and scare them out of their wits. I'd rather not.

I'd rather not have any part of the curse or its breaking.

I sighed and pocketed the ring. The mat was hard, just a smidgen more than my cot at the castle, but there was no one snoring nearby. Soon I drifted to sleep. My dreams, they were not of roses and guilt. They were not of Seline and hope.

They were, simply, nothing.



R

All morning, he stared with longing at his daughters every time they turned their backs. Come dawn, he'd leave a note and head into the forest. I'd have my prisoner, but I'd also have Madame's fury. And in the end, Sibyla's curse would do whatever terrible thing she had promised.

Muck-rolling fairy. And prince. Best not forget who had gotten us into the mess.

By noon, I paced before the hearthroom's window, the crack letting in a bit of cold, refreshing air and a stream of sunshine. The light brightened Seline's work as she bent over a pile of mending on her lap. On a stool by the fire, Reynaud repaired a torn saddle with the speed of a man who soon would be unable to help his daughters. Estelle made candles at the table.

I could scribble a message in spilled wax. If I could write. Doodle a rose, maybe. Perhaps I'm at heart an artist, and it'll be recognizable.

The thoughts, useless, but they eased the pressure of the Command. For now. Soon, though, I'd have to try something real to make Reynaud talk. I paused by the window, breathing the crispness from outside. I'd never have guessed that a person could miss winter. The sparkling white through the crack was a nice change from years of green, and—

Two brown lumps spoiled the perfect whiteness at the edge of the forest.

The door to the girls' room was closed, but Reynaud's was ajar. I squeezed through, moving the door as slowly as possible. Once inside, I found a simple, neat room: a bed, a patchwork quilt, a chest, a bedside table, a stool, and, most importantly, a window.

I opened the shutters, wincing when one creaked.

Waiting... waiting...

No one came to investigate. I stuck my head through the window and angled to see. Definitely saddlebags. Bulging. Madame must have sent Reynaud a reminder.

The pile of snow under the window appeared to cover something bushy. With my luck, it'd also be thorny. I considered throwing the quilt on top but decided a wet quilt wouldn't do, and I hauled myself outside.

Snow ought to be cold when it touches skin.

My flesh goosebumped at the eeriness. My arms told me yes, it was cold, but in a distant, ho-hum sort of way. The branches of the bush snapped and snow scattered as I shimmied off, half upside-down, yelping like a peasant chasing a goose. Finally, I stood and brushed myself off, powdering snow into visibility. A brown path of mangled twigs showed exactly where I'd slid down. Below me: footprints.

"I hope no one looks outside," I said.

To be safe, I sprinted. Sprinted to the bags, hefted them with a grunt, and staggered back. Then I had to climb *up* the bush and through the window.

"That," I said as I sat on the floor of Reynaud's room, panting, "was too much work."

The saddlebags dripped melting snow on the dirt floor. So did I. A nice puddle for my ass, two lines for my legs. I bet I smelled awful. It'd been much too long since my sporadic bath, and I'd cleaned the Green Room since, and slept outside and now rolled in snow.

“Let’s see what’s in you,” I said with a sigh. I lifted a flap, and my eyes widened. “He’s buying her.”

I got to my feet to pull out lengths of scarlet silk and midnight velvet. I let them pool on the quilt: blotches of blood and nighttime. On top, I dumped glittering chains of gold and silver, followed by a bag of coins. A crystal bowl, a jeweled... something. I didn’t know. All of those I pulled out of one saddlebag. I weaved one of the chains between my fingers.

“Here, have some gold and jewelry,” I said in a sing-song voice. I slipped the chain and a few coins into my pocket. Invisible. “They’ll make you so happy. Might as well give up a daughter and sister.”

As if money could console them.

Forget that. Act before the Command tries to suffocate you. Already it grew in weight upon my chest. I closed the shutters, hiding my trek, and returned to the door to the hearthroom. Glancing through the gap, I saw no one had stopped their work. Why should they? If they looked up, they’d see the rose floating in the bowl on the table.

I went to Reynaud. My muscles grew taut as I waited for the perfect moment. Then Estelle began to pour tallow, Seline dropped a needle, and Reynaud yawned while closing his eyes. Cupping my hands to keep the gold invisible, I slid the treasures to the breast pocket of his shirt and draped the chain so that it dangled out. I held my breath—not that it mattered, they couldn’t hear me—and prayed that someone would notice the glint before he did.

“Pappa,” Estelle said, setting the empty pot on the table, “there is a bit of salt pork left. I thought for supper—” She frowned. “What’s that?”

Reynaud started, blinking. He followed his daughter’s gaze to his chest. When he saw the chain, he paled.

“I—My pocket watch.” He tucked it out of sight.

“You sold it,” Seline said, her interest in mending gone. Her chair scooted against hard earth. “Did you get a new one?”

“I, uh...” He made the mistake of sitting up straight, which clinked the coins in his pocket. I breathed out with triumph.

He knew he was caught. He removed the chain and coins, staring at them as if looking at his own gravestone. In some way, he was. He began to sob.

“Pappa?” both his daughters said with worry. They glanced at each other, united in their concern, and rushed to his side.

“It’s...” He shook his head. No, no, no.

An idea struck me. I tried to forget it, but the pressure surged. I eased open the door to the bedroom as if an errant wind had kissed it. The three turned at the creaking hinges. It was impossible to miss the gleams of gold and silver upon blood red and midnight. Reynaud jumped to his feet. When he tried to slam the door, I prevented it by sticking my foot in the doorway. He could go through me. Objects could not. I swore as the door bounced off my foot and swung wide, exposing the glittering doom.

Estelle swallowed. “You said there was no money left.”

“There wasn’t.” He ran into the room, patting the trinkets. “They cannot be real. Oh no, oh no, oh no.” He picked up the velvet as if it were a snake. The dark navy matched the color of Master’s cloak in the garden. Reynaud began to shake. “There wasn’t any money.”

He sank to the bed and moaned. His daughters joined him, one on each side, their expressions incredulous. I saw what flitted over their faces. Was he lying? Has he lost his mind?

Seline's eyes widened. "The rose."

"The cursed, cursed rose," Reynaud said.

No. The cursed castle. The cursed prince. The cursed servant. A quieter thought, barely formed, whispered that I was no better than Master. His actions had condemned a kingdom; my actions had condemned a family.

I was forced, and I do it to save us all.

Between sobs, Reynaud told his tale. The blizzard, the castle in sunshine. Doors that opened on their own, furniture that welcomed him to sit. His daughters' disbelief turned to horror as he reached the end of his story.

For long, excruciating minutes, no one spoke. Estelle's gaze flitted from her drab, woolen skirt to the bed. She fingered the silk, but her calluses snagged the fabric. What I took to be remembrance or longing was erased by resentment.

"Perhaps he is not so bad a beast after all," Reynaud said into the silence. He cupped golden coins in his palm. "This should provide for you while I am gone. It will provide better than I ever could have."

"No!" Seline began to scoop the luxuries into her arms and shove them back into the saddlebag. "We do not need these things. We'll throw them into the snow. He can whisk them back to his castle. You stay with us."

"My child, there is no defying him. His rage, his fangs and claws. You do not know how terrible..." His browned face went white.

"Magic," Estelle said. She'd snatched the silk from the bed, and it pooled in her lap. "If he doesn't go, then the magic will take him away. Or the beast will."

"I don't accept it," Seline said. "There must be another way."

Both girls saw his hesitation. He saw that they saw. Reynaud bowed his head. "The beast demands a prisoner for this crime."

Comprehension. The two sisters traded looks, and something flitted across Estelle's expression. Anger. Blame. The emotions I felt toward Master for cursing us. I seized my opportunity and rushed to the hearthroom. I caressed the rose and sprinted to the bed. As in the garden, the fragrance clung to me. I passed my arm through Estelle's head.

"He picked it for you," Estelle said, her shoulders shaking. "Your whining about the gardens. If you hadn't—"

"I didn't ask—"

"Miss Perfect. 'I don't need anything.' You didn't ask for a gift because Pappa can't buy what you really want. You don't complain about money, but leaving?" Estelle fluttered the silk about. "Being here with Father has never been enough. You want the gardens and the sea and to travel and—"

"I never said anything of the sort! Stell, I would never want—"

"Girls!" Reynaud said. "This is no one's fault but Fortune herself. She meant to ruin me with those storms, and now her wrath is complete." He grabbed each daughter's hand and squeezed. "Do not let me leave in grief. Do not let my last memory of you be one of strife."

Estelle's face crumpled. "I am sorry, Pappa." She flung herself into his arms, and the silk puddled on the floor. "I do not want you to go."

"Yet I will." Reynaud sighed into Estelle's hair.

They pretended to be friends the rest of the day, but I saw the sideways looks. Estelle's barely concealed hatred. Seline's pain.

I fed the conflict. Every time Reynaud glanced at Seline, I disturbed some object so Estelle would catch every loving glance, every smile, every glistening, suppressed tear. For Seline, I deepened her guilt by bringing breezes that carried her father's heartbroken sighs. I showed her the moments Estelle handed him a warm

drink for a cough or fetched him a blanket. I drew her attention to the rose, to every flash of terror on her father's aged face.

I hated the manipulation, but I could not forget Madame's words about the curse. I truly believed Seline to be the best choice. Beautiful, charismatic, vibrant, younger. Whatever was needed for the spell to break, she could surely do it.

It is better this way, I assured myself with each action. I only showed Estelle the truth, for nearly all of Reynaud's wistful smiles were for Seline. I had not planted the seeds of contention. I had merely watered them. *Seline will leave thinking her father safe and her sister happy. She will leave knowing her family has been provided for. It is the best that can be done.*



I by the hearth that night. I went to the girls' room. They shared a bed, each lying with her back facing the other.

"I intend to go tomorrow," Seline whispered into the darkness. With my vision, I could see her pull the cover up to her ear and shiver. "I will go in Pappa's place."

I gripped the silver ring in my pocket and whispered, "Thank you."

"Good," Estelle hissed. "You always wanted adventure, anyway."

Silence. Then, from Seline... "You'll make a dress from that silk the moment I am gone."

Another pause before Estelle answered. "The coins will not last forever. I'll find a husband with that dress, one that can support Father as well."

"Mal earns enough to take care of him."

"Pappa's too proud, and he would not fare well in a noisy inn, especially not after..." The way the unspoken tragedy hung in the air, I knew it was akin to the word 'curse' at the castle. Estelle shifted. "Besides, Zara has a family. The belle of the ball, now the belle of the ale keg. I do not know what she sees in that tubby busybody of hers."

"Watch over them," Seline said, urgency in her voice. "Zara and Pappa. You've always been the best at caring for people. Take care of them, for me."

Estelle nestled into the pillow. "I will. But not for you. You don't really care. You're so self-centered. I bet you're happy to finally have your adventure. I bet you'll like that horrid beast."

Tears darkened Seline's pillow. I wanted to slap Estelle for causing her sister pain. At least I regretted the hurt I caused.

"Ignore her," I whispered over the now-quiet sisters. Seline couldn't hear, but maybe something of my words could touch her heart. "You are good and wonderful, and you love your family. It'll work out. Somehow."

I shut my mouth. My encouragement could go no further than that.

Somehow.

Not an inspiring word.

CHAPTER 5

“*A*s you Commanded me,” I said to Madame’s presence in the castle’s foyer.

Poor Seline balked in the open space of the great double doorway. The two grand stairways, marble flooring, and suits of armor were intimidating enough, but Seline also gaped, wide-eyed at her surroundings, as if any moment a beast might appear and gobble her up.

I was impressed she was even standing. Less than half an hour earlier, she had stepped into snow-covered woods. An invisible *something* had grasped her arm—I *could* touch her if I scrunched my forehead and focused—and then she had appeared outside an open iron gate. Seline had then walked, with only a few tugs, from her frozen morning into a balmy afternoon. The brave woman had held her courage to the entrance of the looming castle. But to actually enter the beast’s lair seemed to be her limit.

“Footman!” Madame called from beside one of the decorative armors. The double doors swung closed, propelling Seline forward and causing her to shake with fear. Sharp footsteps and the jangle of keys approached, then circled, the oblivious girl. “She is perfect.”

“What exactly is she to do?” I asked. Then I bit my tongue. I’d caused enough trouble. I didn’t need more.

Madame ignored me and clapped. “Candle-bearer, please lead the lady to her chambers.”

Candles began to light themselves. At the spontaneous flames, Seline pulled her cloak tighter. Reynaud had told her stories of the castle that lived, but seeing a story come to life had to be terrifying.

“Give her a few moments to look around,” I said. “Can’t you see she’s frightened?”

“Fear is temporary,” Madame said. She gave an order to the footman to take Seline’s pack. It yanked from her grasp, and she cried out.

“You’re making it worse!” I said. Seline had suffered enough by coming. “Can’t you see? She’s shaking!”

Madame cleared her throat, and I remembered to whom I was speaking. In public. Aside from the candle-bearer and footman, I sensed several others and, tucked around corners, plenty of maids who were sure to be eavesdropping.

They all know I brought her. My face heated with anger and embarrassment. I hated how everyone overlooked my work, but I didn’t want to be the subject of gossip.

“See, there she goes,” Madame said. “Fear conquered.” Seline had taken her first step toward a lone, floating candle. “Yes. She will do. Quite. Nicely.”

Candle, girl, and pack headed for the East Wing. Seline no longer looked as terrified, but my annoyance at Madame still gnawed at me.

"I will return to my duties," I said as I bobbed a curtsy. Never had I so strongly yearned for my ignored rooms. I worried for Seline, but I did not want another Command. *And if you're smart, Claudette, you'll never want anything ever again.*

No such luck. "Claudette, I need you to stay here a moment." I waited, tense, as Madame gave instructions to other servants for Seline's meals, entertainment, and clothing. Once she finished, Madame asked me to follow her to her personal quarters.

Normally, I'd be excited to see Madame's rooms. We lower servants shared beds in the bowels of the castle where smoky lamps of oil provided the only light, back when they were lighted. The uppers, however, dined separate, lived separate, breathed separate. They were the nobles' and merchants' extra sons and daughters, and we lowers scrambled to catch glimpses of lives we could only dream of. There was little to glimpse now, of course. Few uppers were awake, for the castle didn't need anyone of decent birth in its enchanted state.

We took a series of hallways on the first floor. Unlike the second floor in the East Wing, there were few treasures on display. The decorations and paintings were still beautiful, but not priceless. The lower floor housed the main library, the kitchens, many of the uppers' chambers and their shared parlors, along with their card rooms and sitting rooms. I'd been here on errands only.

Madame's ring of keys appeared in front of a plain, heavy door. She ushered me inside and my dread increased. She'd filled her sitting room with ornate, spindly-legged tables and chairs. Every surface held something breakable. I didn't belong in this delicate sitting room of lace and pale pink. Neither did Madame, if she still wore her high-necked black dress. And had she herself knitted the doilies draped everywhere? Everything felt wrong.

"Do have a seat," Madame said. She pulled a cord. The door we had entered through cracked open, and she requested some hot water. "I do not hear the fabric of the chair rustling, Claudette."

My cheeks warmed. "Forgive me, Madame. I have been roaming through the woods and sleeping on dirt floors. I do not wish to—"

"Tsh! That is why we clean them."

I balanced myself on the edge of an embroidered cushion, certain my weight would break the chair. I burned to ask what Madame wanted of me, but I remembered my station. Instead, I listened in tense silence as her footsteps approached the wall. She unlocked a cabinet, revealing treats and wines. Two porcelain cups floated to a silver tray, followed by a plate of sugary wafers. My wariness reached alarming levels.

She wants to reward me for my service. Just because I have never been acknowledged doesn't mean it shouldn't happen now. Other servants spoke of it all the time. Even Marie's previous monster of an employer had given her candy as a token of appreciation.

I only wished I didn't despise the service I had performed.

"She will be fine?" I blurted.

The clinking dishes paused. "You do care about the lady, it seems. That is exactly the kind of girl we need. Thoughtful and attentive."

I watched the tray drift to a lacy table between my chair and its twin. A knock on the door, and a kettle of hot water entered. Madame poured the water into a chrysanthemum-painted teapot and returned the kettle. The door clicked; we were alone once more.

"Do you like sugar? Or cream?"

"I have never had tea, Madame."

"Then you are in for a treat. Please, take a wafer."

I did, but I could not bite into it. Not yet. I wondered how grubby my hands were.

"As you were traveling, I realized I do not know much about you," Madame said. "I mean, aside from your record. Raised in three orphanages, put in service here at age twelve as a floor drudge, and now you attend several rooms in the West Wing."

"Yes," I said, because I did not know what else to say.

"What are your ambitions, Claudette?"

"Ambitions?"

"Dreams, aspirations. Do you wish to stay as you are forever?"

I thought of the piano I dusted every day in the Harmony Room. There hadn't been a performance to eavesdrop on for over nine years. Sometimes I plunked the keys, unable to stop myself, but a note here and there couldn't even begin to be a song.

I doubted Madame really cared about the secret wishes of my heart. "I am not unhappy where I am."

A pause. "You can be honest with me."

"I am being honest." I didn't mind cleaning. I only wished someone would give me credit for what I did. Honesty and blabbing my feelings were different things, however, and I figured the less I spoke to Madame the better.

Nobles care about appearances. Madame had forgotten the obvious. I knew exactly how to end this conversation on ambition and reward. "You do remember my... shortcoming."

She poured the tea, and an impossibly fragile-looking cup floated my way. I took the saucer, and the teacup rattled against its plate. I snatched the cup's handle and set down the wafer.

Madame cleared her throat. "I do recall. It may have limited you in the past, but people overlook such misfortunes when they find true loyalty. And you, my parlormaid, have proved yourself of the best quality. Besides, it hardly matters in our current state. As for the future..." The shift of stiff fabric in a shrug. "Some praise, a full skirt, and custom shoes can hide your flaw."

The essence of dead leaves filled my mouth. How did the upper class swallow this stuff daily? Of course, I had thought the same of ale when I had first tasted it. "Forgive me, but what are you saying?"

"His Highness has a new opportunity for you."

"The main library?" I said with fake surprise. *Not another Command. Please, leave me alone.*

"You know of Lady Alys?"

It took me a moment. "She was a noblewoman living at the castle, I think."

"Observant, too. Better and better. Lady Alys is a distant relation to His Highness, and since she was residing at the castle, she was not spirited away with the guests when the unfortunate happened. Instead, she slept. That is, until Lady Lucrece found her way here. You remember the previous visitor?"

She paused again, so I made a mmm-ing sound and took another swig of the ghostly tea.

"Since she was a lady of rank, His Highness woke Lady Alys. She served as lady-in-waiting for Lady Lucrece, as the noblewoman did not arrive with any personal servants."

Noblewomen? Ladies-in-waiting? I did not like the direction of this conversation at all.

“When Lady Lucrece failed to break the spell, Lady Alys took it as a personal failure. We all feared we had lost our only opportunity. Lady Alys did not go back to peaceful rest, but instead roams the South Hall, barely able to function in her despair.”

I shuddered. After we discovered our sleeping brethren, we relocated them to the South Hall so that we would not accidentally injure them. More than anything, though, the endless sleep made our spines crawl. Only two people visited them: the lowest maid and the lowest footman. They went to clean. It turned out that, over enough time, the dust that fell on invisible bodies did accumulate and become visible, creating fuzzy gray outlines of noses, eyes, and mouths.

“She does... live?” I asked.

Madame laughed. “Of course. She is not a ghost. When she becomes hungry, she eats, and sometimes we hear her speak, but Lady Alys is not the woman she once was. Which brings us to our predicament.”

She was going to make me say it aloud. Was I supposed to be eager after what she’d put me through? For all the tea I had drunk, my tongue scraped against the roof of my mouth. “You do not have a lady-in-waiting.”

“Precisely.” Her cup clinked on its saucer with finality. “You may have little knowledge of the lifestyle fine ladies live, but you are clever and resourceful. You will be both her mistress of the wardrobe and her lady-in-waiting, staying beside her every waking moment. Unless, of course, His Highness dismisses you.”

There wasn’t the doomed sensation of a Command. I could still get out of this. “I am a poor choice. I could not even help her into a gown! And I do not know—”

“Nonsense. You will figure everything out, and you can always ask Lady Alys for instruction.”

“You said she was crazy!”

A tug on my empty cup, and it floated over to the tray. “She is not fit to assist Lady... What is the girl’s name?”

“Seline.”

“Divine. Lady Seline. While Lady Alys is not emotionally stable, she still remembers much of her former life. I have faith in you. Come, let me show you to Lady Seline’s chambers, and your own.”

I followed her into the hallway, my stomach heavier than lead. The inflection in her voice: your *own*. All servant girls dream of such a thing, though the least ambitious ones simply yearn for their own bed in a room full of others. Everything Madame had done—the tea, the insane rise of status, her honeyed words—all of it was presented as if it were natural that such a reward would come to me.

And maybe, in her eyes, it was natural. I had tricked a man into stealing. I’d been his shadow, trailing through snow, causing disharmony in his family. Despicable deeds deserved a dream to erase them. Is that what she intended?

You are right, Madame. I am clever. I could tell a dream from a nightmare. Despite the luxuries, Madame still meant to use me. There were other ladies Master could wake, ladies who knew how to serve Seline. There were other servants who knew more about nobility than I. Marie, for instance. As a chambermaid, she cleaned their rooms, touched their things. She even interacted with them from time to time, back when people came and went. The Lady of the Keys knew this. Madame knew about all of us. She knew I barely spoke to girls of my own social class, much less my betters.

Not that I’ll be speaking to Seline.

Lady Seline, I corrected myself. I ought to treat her like a princess, after what I had done. And with that thought, the reality of what was happening closed in.

I am going to see every day how I've ruined her life.

"I've put her in our grandest guest quarters," Madame said, still walking ahead of me. "I assigned Marie as chambermaid. You are friends, I believe, and she has done excellently in the past."

"I'm sorry, where did you say you'd put her?"

"That is right. You do not spend time in the East Wing." I did not correct her by saying I hadn't been paying attention. "We have grander rooms in the West, but she is not family. Nor do I think it a bad thing to keep her some distance from our prince in his current state. Therefore, I have selected the Rose Suite for her. It is truly elegant, and I thought it fitting as Reynaud said his daughter loves roses so."

Bile burned my throat.

No one dared to pause in their duties as Madame and I passed. Rugs continued to float, doors opened and closed. It didn't matter. They'd Sense me by Madame. The parlormaid who brought the girl. Tonight they'd whisper about me, if not out of curiosity then to pass the time.

At the very end of the wing, we came to double doors carved with vines and roses. Madame led me into a deep mauve sitting room. Open windows let in fresh air and sunshine. Tapestries of nature scenes covered paneled walls so light a pink they were almost white. In the center of the room, three comfortable chairs clustered around a low table. A giant bouquet of roses on the table filled the room with perfume.

My stomach roiled.

"Through that door, you will find my lady's bedrooms," came Madame's voice.

I swallowed. "Which door?"

She sighed. "Ten years, and I still forget not to point. The one muffling the crying. The farthest."

Of course. Now I heard the quiet sobs.

Madame still hadn't Commanded me. I tried to come up with an excuse, some reason why I absolutely *couldn't* take care of Seline, but Madame started talking again. "Through my lady's bedroom, you will find her dressing room and bathing room. I will wake the seamstress tomorrow to take Lady Seline's measurements. That would be an ideal time to ask the seamstress for instruction on how to assist with ladies' gowns. Anyway, until Lady Seline's clothing is finished, she will have to wear whatever we have on hand."

The door closest to us opened. "This, Claudette, is where you now live."

I walked into the room with disbelief. The bed was large enough for three scullery maids, with plump pillows—had I ever owned a pillow?—and a heavy satin coverlet of vibrant burgundy. If the blanket wasn't enough, for the nights still got quite cool, there was my own fireplace as well. In the corner sat a tiny desk beside a bookcase stuffed with books I could not read. In another corner sat a basket with cloth and skeins of fine thread.

"You will find your own bathing room and a small wardrobe through there. Not nearly as grand as your lady's, but suitable for a woman of your station."

My mind tried to comprehend everything. "I sleep here?"

"I suggest bathing every night or morning to avoid aggravating the launderers. Though no longer are your sheets in danger of furniture polish." A pause. "A daily bath will be good practice for you as well. For the future."

I forced a laugh. "No lady who could see me would want me to wait on her. Even more, I do not have the bloodline—"

"Are you always so deaf? Loyalty is rewarded."

The room was beautiful, and so were her words. Too beautiful. "I may be low, but I am not simple. You're buying me."

"You may choose to look at it that way. Do you like the room?"

"What are you really asking me to do?"

She closed the door to the main sitting room. "You are not allowed to gossip about this with the other servants."

The light Command gave my chest a small squeeze. "Fine. Now tell me."

"I need you to break the spell."

I stared at her. Rather, I stared through her at the door. "But I thought—"

"Oh, it is all up to Lady Seline, but it is not as simple as her living here for a time. No, I need you to persuade her."

"Persuade her to do what?" Anger started to kindle. "Did I not do enough by getting her to come?"

"Persuade her to fall in love."

I sat on the bed.

"We thought, at first, we only needed a girl to agree to marry His Highness," Madame said. She could have been discussing the selection of drapes for all of the calmness in her voice. "He told me so, in the beginning. Sib—*She* suggested that he propose to every maiden who found her way here. Propose nightly, until she agreed."

"That's insane. Master looks like a... You cannot be serious."

"He took the advice. He asked Lady Lucrece every single night at supper. After a few nights, she accepted. His Highness remained a beast, we remained invisible. Enraged, he cracked the dining table in two, and Lady Lucrece fled the castle in terror."

The room spun around me. Lucrece had been *dining* with Master? The rumors had always suggested that she'd fled upon first seeing him. But no. She'd seen him. She'd seen him *eat*, and she'd—she'd—What girl would agree to marry a beast?

"And then?" I asked.

"Marriage clearly was not enough. We can only surmise that, as all things are with fairies, She has something more improbable in mind. Love."

"You want me to make Seline fall in love with—" I couldn't even say it.

"Not *make*. Persuade. You cannot make a person fall in love," Madame said, with a tone one might use with a child.

I struggled to regain control over my shock. "If I don't?"

"His Highness has never told me the exact punishment, but he has said it will affect everyone in this castle, and will have repercussions for the rest of the kingdom."

Repercussions? As in everyone dies, or someone else becomes king? Vague threats did not intimidate me. "I cannot. For her to love—It is impossible."

"You must."

Why me? Why was I the one to ruin Reynaud's life? Why was I the one to make Seline—Satin sheets were not worth this. "I won't. If she needs 'persuasion,' as you put it, you can do it."

"I cannot."

She was Lady of the Keys. Lady of Impending Doom, as the upper parlormaid called her. She could do anything. Why was she making me take on something so absurd?

"It is not allowed," Madame said, as if guessing my thoughts. "All of us are compelled to continue in our duties. Have you ever tried to *not* keep the parlors?"

Surely you have noticed you cannot resist for long. You feel guilt, distress.”

“You’d punish me.”

“And you never shirked before the enchantment?”

She had a point there.

“The compulsion is subtle, but it is there. Lady Alys escaped it by not having a purpose and then by going mad. The rest of us must continue on. I can change your duties, but the only one who can change mine is His Highness. He will not Command me to be Lady Seline’s waiting woman.”

“Why not?”

A snort. “Do you think there is anyone else in the castle competent enough to run the household? His Highness cannot replace me. And besides...”

I grasped for any information that might give me an escape. “Besides?”

“You may as well know, for it is your problem now. He has given up hope.”

Hope. That treacherous feeling again; the one I felt when near Seline. Perhaps, when Master saw her... “No. No, I cannot. I will not ‘persuade’ Seline to fall in love with a monster.”

“You disappoint me, Claudette. I’d thought you intelligent enough, caring enough, to free us.”

If her disappointment had sounded genuine, as if she had believed in me, I might have agreed to try. I didn’t like the curse, either. But Madame’s disappointment sounded more like disgust. The lame parlormaid had not taken the bait.

“I give you this duty,” Madame said, voice hard. “You will serve as Seline’s lady-in-waiting, and you will help her fall in love. You cannot escape the compulsion now.”

The very air pressed upon me. For a brief moment, I heard Seline’s sobs, despite the walls between us. Magical threads, tight but giddy, connected her to me, and I knew she’d be able to Summon me as Madame had. Then, magic clamped about my throat like shackles, granting *me* the ability to Command others for her comfort. The world shifted, as my days, my nights, became hers.

As for the love Command, vague images immediately came to mind: pictures of Seline and a beast walking together, talking together, *laughing* together.

The door opened. Madame had condemned me, and now she was taking her leave.

I gripped the edge of the bed, my fingers slipping against satin. I managed a whimper. “How? How do I make her fall in love with someone I fear and hate?”

“You learn to like him.”

The door clicked.

CHAPTER 6

I watched her weep.

She did it beautifully. Seline never snorted or hiccuped. She just sobbed softly into her pillow, consumed by sorrow for the father she had left, for the sister who envied her. Hair so dark a brown it looked like ebony pooled around her head.

I cried, too. Except I knew my face blotted more than a drunkard's. I also squeaked when I cried. But it did not stop me from weeping. I shared this rose-embroidered prison. Madame had trapped me as I had trapped Seline.

Eventually, we both ran out of tears. She lay still, staring at nothing. I sat by the bed, trying to think of nothing. For nearly an hour. Numb, both of us, hoping the future would never come.

A faint knock ended the timelessness. I rubbed my eyes and tidied my hair out of pure habit. Seline did not notice me slip through the half-open door to the sitting room, and I don't think she heard the creak of the door in the hallway.

"Yes?" I said, my voice thick.

"Madame sends orders to dress the guest for supper." A boy. One of the two pages still awake.

A clench in my stomach. "Seline's dining with—"

"Alone, Madame says."

No beast, no love. Not yet. I returned to Seline's room with relief. She still stared. Out the window, I realized. At freedom.

She didn't move when I opened the door to the dressing room, on the opposite side of the room from the window. The warm smell of fabric filled the air. About five dresses hung in an expansive wardrobe. All were too elegant for my rough hands to touch. Satin and silk and lace and buttons of pearl. I reached for the silk, thought better of it, and made my way to the washroom.

Good. I don't have to bother anyone for water, I thought as I reached for the pump. I filled a metal basin, and soon my dirt popped all of the little soapy bubbles.

I rinsed the bowl and refilled it, placing it on a small heater. Seline would want to wash her face, and icy water wasn't welcoming. I used a towel to carry the hot bowl to a marble basin on the dressing room's table. I nearly dropped it when I saw the neat rows of tiny pots before the mirror. Marie had cleaned up spilled powders once. I didn't know the first thing about putting them on—

Calm down. I took a deep breath. *I doubt she wants to use cosmetics. She doesn't need them.*

I chose the darkest gown: midnight blue, set with pearls. It didn't look seductive like the scarlet dress, nor carefree like the buttercream. I studied the clasps and the corset. They seemed simple enough. Except I didn't know how many petticoats to put under.

Should I try it on first and—

Idiot! You can't see yourself in the mirror. Perhaps I can feel the puffiness of the skirt? I held up the dress's bodice and glanced at my chest, only to blush, again forgetting the obvious. I patted around and eyed the stays. No, no. Seline and I were not shaped the same.

The water no longer steamed. If I didn't dress her soon, she'd be late for supper, and Madame would scold me. I knocked on the door to the bedroom.

"Yes?"

I opened the door wide. Seline sat on the bed, lip trembling. How did I tell her it was time for supper? I shook the skirt of the gown I'd draped on a stool, feeling silly.

Seline lowered her head and touched her rough woolen skirt. She had to be hot, wearing layers meant for winter, but she didn't move. I tried again, lifting the fabric and making a 'come hither' motion. With a sigh, she came to me. I held a washcloth in front of her face. Her lifeless expression did not change. Finally she took it, walked to the dressing table, and wiped the salt from her cheeks.

"Father..." A tiny gasp of a repressed sob. "He mentioned you. Or are there several of you?"

I stood there, unable to answer.

"Thank you, for the water." Seline squeezed her eyes shut, and this time she did not cry.

I fluttered my hands in helplessness. I couldn't tell her everything was fine. I couldn't tell her that, if she'd only fall in love with a beast, he'd turn into a handsome, rich prince with a bestial heart.

I couldn't tell her I was sorry.

She washed her face, twice, then turned to the dress. "I suppose I am dressing for supper?"

I stayed silent and helpless.

"Will..." She paled. "Will the... *master* of this place..."

That was it. I *had* to find some way to talk to her. A good lady-in-waiting quieted her mistress's fears, didn't she? I took the towel she had used to dry her face, bunched it into a ball shape, and 'shook' it side to side.

A smile ghosted her lips. "I thought, with such a fine dress..." Seline's gaze drifted to the other dresses in the open wardrobe. She nodded. "Thank you."

So the near-mourning color pleased her. Now I just had to figure out how to get it on. Once more my hands did the flailing-in-air thing. Should I help her take her clothes off, or would that insult her? The chambermaids talked as if ladies were more helpless than children, but this lady had been living in a cottage with dirt floors. As indecision crippled me, Seline took off her own clothes. Her actions inspired me to check the chest of drawers for clean underthings, but there were none. Of course. Who wanted previously worn undergarments? Ew.

Seline watched the drawers open and close and squeezed her eyes shut again. "No matter. You didn't expect a girl."

Guilt stabbed my heart. She was thinking of her father, and how we must have prepared for him.

"It's not forever," I said in a whisper. "Once you—"

Fall in love with a beast? Bile burned in my throat. *But it's that or... something. Something happens.*

Once again, while I dithered in my own distracted thoughts, Seline acted. She solved my petticoat problem by grabbing one and slipping it on. I tied the strings, laced her corset, and lifted the gown's skirt. The dress seemed easier to put on from

the bottom, and she raised her arms in apparent agreement.

Somehow we made it through dressing. Tiny buttons surprised me at the wrists, along with hidden clasps at the elbows. I swore aloud a few times, my breath disturbing a few of her hairs.

Another small smile appeared as I fumbled with the elbow hooks. "It seems I am not the only one who must adjust to a new life."

Her acceptance of my fumbling calmed my panic a little. *I can do this. I can take care of her.* I brought her to a full-length mirror. All of the golden-headed beauties of my realm would wish daggers at her throat. She looked radiant. She looked exotic.

She looked miserable.

For a brief moment, I considered disobeying Madame's second Command. I'd be Seline's lady-in-waiting with all my heart, caring for her until the day of doom. Sibyla would return and punish the entire castle for something we didn't do, but my conscience would be clean. Seline was innocent. She'd return to her family and live her life, her time here nothing more than a nightmare. Yet, at the mere thought of ignoring the love Command, my throat closed and my heart raced. I couldn't. I couldn't willfully disobey my orders. Even if my conscience wanted me to.

Sibyla punished an entire castle for one man's mistake, I told myself. If Seline and Master don't fall in love, she might doom the poor girl for not saving us.

Girl. Seline was my age. Yet I felt old and stretched thin.

If only I could comfort her. Hold her. Anything. I furrowed my brow, held my breath, and stretched out my hand.

She jerked when my hand touched her hair. I lost my concentration, and my hand became insubstantial, passing through her head. It felt like moving through ghostly cobwebs. I exhaled and tried again. This time she stayed still, and my hand stroked her hair as one might comfort a small child.

Seline smiled for real this time. The melancholy vanished and the evening sunshine lighting the room could not compare. My heart soared.

Focus. What else? My fingers lingered on her thick, dark hair. I did not know how to pile it in any fancy way, but I could untangle it. I grabbed a brush and set to work. She stayed patient as I smoothed the soft waves of her glossy hair. Then there was nothing left to do.

Like a lovely wooden doll, she followed a candle to a small dining room. And, after, to the Beast.

CHAPTER 7

For someone used to gulping her food, it seemed that supper took forever. Seline ate alone, except for a fleet of servants that I just caught a Sense of before the candle-bearer told me to go to a side room. There I found an elaborately laid ‘small’ table for just myself. For an hour, dishes floated in and out: soups and salads and nibbles and cutlets and gravies and fruits. I wanted to giggle at the absurdity of it all, except...

Except.

In the end, I didn’t eat much. My stomach was too full of guilt and nerves and fear and anger and everything. No one told me for sure, but I doubted Seline ate much, either. After the dessert was whisked away, Seline and I were reunited in the hallway by Bertram, the footman I’d felt so much jealousy toward...

Yesterday. Here, at the castle, it was only last night when Reynaud had stayed. The time shift unsettled me, to say the least. It’d only been this morning, here at the castle, when I’d left. In the few hours since Seline’s arrival, how many days had passed for her family?

I had better things to worry about. Like Bertram opening the door to Master’s favorite drawing room.

Before, when Reynaud had come, I hadn’t really noticed the room itself. Now I did, and I didn’t like it. Dark. Masculine. Plenty of sconces and candelabras, but they weren’t lit. The only illumination came from the small fire in the fireplace, which cast long shadows around the room. The thin moonlight was no help, peering in through an open window.

I remembered Master in the sunlight and decided perhaps the shadows were for the best.

Seline’s dainty, rose-colored chair looked frail and insignificant beside Master’s wing-backed monstrosity. A waist-high tea table separated them. It was meager protection, but protection nonetheless. She could stare at her teacup instead of at the beast.

“Keep the door open,” I said, “in case she needs to, well...”

Flee.

“Already ordered, my lady,” Bertram said. He did not falter when calling me ‘lady’ like the other servants at supper. He didn’t sound like a person who struggled with much but instead took everything in his stride. Unlike me, his voice didn’t betray the anxiety of Seline fainting at the sight of Master.

Seline paused in front of the chairs, staring at Master’s. She didn’t pale. She didn’t shake. Her luminous eyes simply widened as if trying to envision what sort of thing could possibly fill that much space. Surely she could not. Her father had stuttered ‘horns’ and ‘massive,’ but there was no describing the prince.

She took her seat, rigid. I picked one of the simpler chairs along the wall where I could watch them both. The tea service came in and slid onto the empty table, with the maid muttering how sorry she was that she'd arrived late. When Seline didn't move, the maid hesitated, probably wondering if the lady knew how to serve tea. I wanted to shout that Seline was petrified and not in a state to worry about tea, but the maid soon began the tea for her. Minutes passed as it brewed. A teacup filled, and Seline took it with thanks but didn't drink. The maid left with a sniff.

Bertram's presence drifted away, too. I suspected he lingered within shouting distance in the hallway, and perhaps others lurked with him. In the drawing room, however, no one. Just Seline, me, and the crackle of the fire.

I smelled him first.

Strange, that something so horrible should smell so... enticing. The cinnamon again, mingled with a musky scent that was not offensive. Seline didn't stiffen, so I did not think she'd noticed. Next came the tap of claws softened by the thick rug. His snorting breath, muted, as if he knew he made too much noise and feared to breathe. My eyes flicked to the doorway. The fire did not penetrate there, and the candles in the hallway had been extinguished, but my enhanced sight saw his cloaked bulk filling the space. Seline did not stir. Her chair faced fire and comfort.

Master nodded in my direction; an awkward, almost unfamiliar motion. I watched, entranced, as he moved closer to the chairs. I never guessed something that bulky, that misshapen, could flow across the floor like a shadow. He paused behind his chair, his form mostly blocked from her view, and made a soft *whuff* with an exhale. She jerked, causing droplets of tea to splash onto her saucer.

"My lord." She sat so stiffly I feared any movement may snap her.

"Beast." He said the word gently, but it must have sounded severe, perhaps even angry to her.

"Beast," she said, in barely a whisper. She set her tea on the table, spilling more, and jumped to her feet. With an air of competence, she swept a deep curtsy. "Seline."

He made a protesting rumble, which unfortunately sounded more like an offended reproof. Her curtsy crumpled into a cringe. I rushed to her and nearly crossed my eyes with focus as I smoothed her hair. Her whimpers ceased. When I looked up, I found Master staring at the space beside her. At me.

"Forgive," he grunted. Seline cringed again under my hand. I glared as Master licked his lips in the most terrifying way. Thank goodness she stared at the floor. He gave it another try. "Am harsh. I—I cannot..."

He cannot talk like a man, I wanted to explain to her.

His muscles rippled under his cloak. His fumbling for words was failing.

"Think calm," I whispered. His eyes narrowed at me, filled with sparks of anger. "You cannot lose your temper, not even with yourself. She will not understand. She's barely able to stand."

His scowl shifted to her, and the brows softened. I dared to breathe a sigh of relief. The tiniest bit of satisfaction surged through me. It didn't get far before guilt overcame it. Seline stood there, trembling, because of me.

"Sit," he grunted.

"Please," I suggested.

Another spark of anger, but he didn't let it reach his voice. "Please."

She fell into the seat. I smoothed her skirts for her and handed her the cup of tea.

"Your servants," she said, her voice a bit high, "are very kind to me."

Master took his chair, and though he tried to move slowly, it still made her lean as far as she could from him. He didn't notice. He wasn't even looking at her. "You guest. Here."

"Ah." Her finger caressed the teacup's handle. "They are servants, aren't they? Or do the dishes move by themselves?"

"Servants. Invisible."

"Invisible," she said in a soft voice, thick with wonder. "Who enchanted this place?"

He didn't answer. Instead, a crunching sound overcame the crackles of the fire. His grip on the chair's carved armrests had splintered the wood. She paled.

"Forgive me," Seline said. Her hands tightened around the teacup until she feared she'd shatter it, as he had the armrests. "It must be an uncomfortable topic. I shouldn't have brought it up."

Tense silence. Master's eyes squeezed shut as his hands unclenched, finger by finger.

This isn't working at all. She's supposed to fall in love with this? He could take lessons from Robert and have more of a chance than he does now.

"I... have not... spoken," he said, his face still smashed up in emotion and concentration. "To people. Years. Forgotten."

Because we servants do not count as people. Do you even speak to Lord Antoine? I doubted Master had any friends. Who wanted to be with a prince who shouted at and despised everyone?

"I understand you," Seline said. "You are fine."

"No," he said, rougher than before. Her porcelain cup rattled against its saucer. He softened his gravel. "No. Must... *I* must... practice."

"Ah," was all she managed.

"Now castle is home," Master said. "All yours. Speak, and they will do."

Seline brought her cup to her lips, though she doubted any tea survived. "Can my family visit?"

"No."

The teacup lowered.

They sat in silence as firelight flickered. Madame asked the impossible. Sibyla asked the impossible. I imagined the fairy laughing at us and clapping her hands. What had he done for her to curse him so thoroughly?

Silence deepened, and Madame's Command pressed on me. Or maybe it was my own exasperated boredom. Finally, I spoke. "You could talk to her. Put her at ease."

Master shifted in his seat, tiny splinters dusting his black cloak. The servant assigned to repair the chair would have some colorful words to say. Master didn't notice his mess at all, but he twisted to the left to gaze at my chair. He glared, lightened it to a frown, then turned right toward Seline. "You happy? With Claudette?"

Seline stirred. "Who?"

"Maid." He shook his head. "No, lady. In waiting."

She half-laughed. "As if I am royalty?" She sobered as she took in the treasures glittering on the mantle. Her fingers fiddled with some pearls sewn on her skirt. "Claudette is her name?"

He grunted.

"I like her. Very much. She strikes me as young and uncertain, but I have not met a kinder servant." She smiled, a small one, but the fire seemed to glitter. "Nor a more invisible one. She can understand me? If I simply speak aloud?"

He nodded. "Yes. Claudette is yours. If need..." He fell silent, as if in thought. As if gathering the right words. "Think hard to call. She comes."

I spoke. "It will feel the same as when you and Madame do it? The tugging?"

Master's gaze locked on my chair. "Yes."

Seline leaned forward and followed his gaze. "You can see her?"

"No. Sense."

"Oh. Hear her?"

"Yes."

Her brow furrowed as if she were trying to puzzle out my form.

"Late," he said. "Should sleep."

She stood, perhaps a little too quickly. A hasty curtsy. "Sleep well, Beast."

He held up a hand the moment her back turned. "Claudette, wait. Footman?"

I focused and identified the aura near the door as Bertram. Seline walked to the opening door and glanced over her shoulder at my seemingly empty chair. Then she disappeared.

"Lady Marguerite," Master growled. I hadn't thought to Sense for Madame, but Master apparently had. A flutter of skirts and keys sounded immediately. She had been just outside the door. "You spy."

"Your Highness," Madame said as if shocked. "I wouldn't dream of eavesdropping—"

"You do. You meddle." He rose and pointed in my direction. "Her. Again. Not lady, a maid—"

"Your second cousin is not fit for waiting on anyone," Madame said.

He grunted an agreement, but the irritation did not fade. He repeated. "Maid. Low, rude. Must be another—"

"Claudette proved her dependability by bringing the girl here," Madame said, interrupting again, easy as a breeze. In the firelight, I swore I saw Master's neck hairs bristle. "Do you wish to wake another and explain the curse? Do you want to risk another lady losing her sanity? Claudette is competent. Moreover, she's here."

Now I bristled. For Master, Madame's praise had diminished quite a bit. I'd known her words had been flattery, but still. I had pride.

Master drew in another breath, and Madame cut in for the third time. "Seline is pleased. That is enough, is it not?"

"Fail." He began to pace. "We fail."

Madame made a soft 'tsh' sound. "As I told you before, your—"

"I am not child!" he roared. A tiny feminine cry echoed down the hallway, and my heart leaped in my throat to know he'd scared Seline. Master balled his fists at the Lady of the Keys. "Go! I order you, go!"

Icy prickles swept over my skin, and Madame's presence vanished. *Poof.*

"You," he said. He whirled, his cloak billowing and making him even more massive. "Common. Nothing more. Insulting. Do not speak. Do not correct."

My jaw tensed. "Do not correct *me*."

He began to growl, but I cut him off as brazenly as Madame. "She was terrified! If I'd been silent, you would have scared Seline out of the room. Her sanity is more important to me than your pride."

"Your prince!"

"*I am your prince,*" I said. The Marie-ish part of my consciousness warned I was being suicidal, but the evening's tension had made me giddy. "You already ruined Seline's life by forcing her to come."

"Me force?" Master clawed the rug, slashing dark green. "You brought!"

“On your orders.” Which was only partially true, but my mouth hurtled on. “She’s miserable, and I’ll not let you make it worse.”

He shook his claw at me, rug fibers clinging to them. “You... Nothing! Not lady!”

“I didn’t ask to be a lady-in-waiting. But I am, and I *will* help Seline. I will take care of her until you release her or she saves us all.” Anger had made me drunk; anger mixed with fear. Now I added a sass. “Until then, you should learn how to speak and act like a gentleman.”

He let loose a roar. My knees quivered at the sound, but I forced myself to walk away. Teacups shattered against the wall by the doorway as I left. The tea table upturned, and I heard the sound of ripping fabric. Only when I’d set foot in the hallway did I break into a run. He didn’t Summon me back.

I didn’t stop until I made it to Seline’s rooms. I found her shaking on the bed, her pillow saturated with tears. I shook as well. The anger and fear had drained away, leaving my insides wobbly like jelly. *You idiot, what were you thinking? He could have ripped you to shreds, like he did the rug.* But he hadn’t. He hadn’t done anything but throw a temper tantrum. Because, in the end, what *could* he do? Not dismiss me from the castle. Demote me, possibly, but Madame might protest.

He hates her. He knows Madame is why Reynaud took the rose. He knows she is why Seline’s here. Our prince did not have a reputation for being an idiot. Just for being a brat. If he resented the Lady of the Keys for meddling, and he thought me her tool.... Well. I was. But my words to him that night in the hall, when I’d been with Marie, that’s where his dislike of me had begun.

Not that I cared if he liked me. I cared if he liked Seline.

She’d fallen asleep mid-cry. I brushed a tear-plastered lock of hair from her cheek.

My chest tightened; the magic of the Command. Seline was no closer to love after being scared out of her wits.

“And she won’t be until he learns to control his temper,” I growled at the blighted Command. His roars, his smashing the cups and furniture; she would have fainted dead away had she seen.

I left her fully clothed on the bed rather than wake her, and returned to my own room to ready for sleep. When I washed my face, my hands trembled. Rather than change to a nightdress, for the buttons would force me to admit that I *still* trembled, I went to bed fully clothed, like a parlormaid. The mattress squished and sighed under my weight, and I wondered if I could fall asleep on such a thing.

I did.

And I dreamed. I dreamed of the garden, of Master shredding roses as his eyes glowed with anger. Seline gathered the mangled petals by the armful and threw them on my grave.

At least she cried prettily.

CHAPTER 8

“Claudette, wake up!” Marie called in singsong.

I groaned at the cheery voice. It insisted, and I flailed around in the expansive comforter. The goose-down pillow threatened to lull me back to sleep, but the covers began to pull themselves off of me.

I grabbed, but I was too slow. “It’s morning?” I squinted at the crumpling blanket.

A giggle. “Yes, sleepyhead. I’ve ordered up hot water for a bath. Don’t let it get cold.”

“What time is it?”

“Oh, maybe two hours after sunrise.”

I snapped to a sitting position. “Why didn’t you get me up earlier? I have to—” I paused at the edge of the bed. Normally I began airing the parlors at this time. “What does a lady-in-waiting do in the morning?”

“Sleep in, apparently.” A dressing gown floated to me.

I wanted to laugh. Me, wear a dressing gown?

“You silly, why don’t you take it? It’s soft.”

I did and tossed it on the bed beside me. “I’ve never worn anything soft.”

“Neither have I. This is my chance to live through you.” Slippers floated over, too.

“Stop waiting on me as if I were some lady.”

“I’m sorry, *Lady* Claudette. Madame’s orders.”

I snorted, and the slippers bumped into my chest. Marie was trying to smack into me.

I snatched them out of the air. The slippers disappeared the moment I put them on. “No one will know if I wear my servant’s apron.”

“How do they feel? Are you standing in them?”

“Are you always this perky in the morning?”

“I’ve been up for hours, you know. It’s not early to me.”

“They are... Ooh!” I shifted my weight from foot to foot.

“Ha,” she said, her voice smug. Past the open dressing-room door, the door to my washroom waved back and forth. “Now, come to your bath.”

The washroom was cramped. The tub, the sitting-up-straight kind, had been filled with hot water hauled by a lower drudge up the servants’ stairs. I soaked, self-conscious as Marie explained how she had been assigned—more like volunteered herself—to wait on me, just as I waited on Seline. The Lady of the Keys was serious about my new assignment, and everyone had been ordered to treat me as an upper. With the position came all the luxuries, including sleeping in and someone to wait on me in the mornings.

"Not that any of us envy you," Marie said. Her voice came above me, for she stood while I got to soak. "I mean, the slippers and food sound nice and all, but then we'd have to deal with Master. I heard he threw quite the fit last night."

I grimaced. "Who cleaned up after him?"

"Thérèse. Said it was awful. Splintered wood, shredded paintings. Took her half the night. What did you do?"

The water sloshed. "Me? Why do you think it was me?"

Marie laughed in response and dumped water over me, rinsing the soap from my hair. "Goodness, Claudette. When was the last time you bathed? The water's bracken."

"Same time you did." Her assumption regarding Master bothered me. "Why do you think I was the one who upset him?"

"Because." A towel—white, of all things—hovered in front of the tub. "I remember the other night. You've been rebellious. Lately."

I humphed. "I've been extremely obedient. More than you know."

"Uh-huh."

I sighed and began to rub my skin dry. "You're right. I did upset Master. But Madame started it. And I had to say *something*. He'd scared Seline."

"Better for her to be scared, I say. You're going to have to brush your own hair. Anyway, if she's scared, maybe she'll run away. Leave this place."

"She can't." I winced as the brush hit snarls. I wanted to tell Marie what I'd learned about the curse, but Madame had ordered me not to speak of it to other servants. I wasn't in the mood to wrestle with the magic.

Marie was curious, however. "Everyone says she's going to break the spell. Is it true?"

"The uppers seem to think she will."

"Then it must be so." Her faith in the uppers' wisdom disturbed me. Had I been so ho-hum? The door to my dressing room swung open. "Do you want to wear lace?"

"I want to wear wool."

"No good. The launderers have already taken off with your old things." She pulled out something frothy and pink.

"I look horrible in pink."

"Then this is the only time in your life you can wear it."

I gave up. I had to instruct her how to help me into it, as clearly I'd become an expert after dressing Seline once. At least no one would see if we made mistakes.

"You should hold your tongue around him," Marie said, bringing the topic back to my rebelliousness.

"Should I?" Pink vanished as buttons buttoned and hooks fastened. "I've been thinking, Marie. Perhaps he's a spoiled brat because no one ever told him no."

"It's not your place to tell him."

Somebody needs to, or the spell will never end. I couldn't say that to Marie, however, without going into details. I tugged on the dress's lace in frustration. "Who, then? His father's not going to waltz in and give him a spanking." I sobered. "His father may not even be alive."

"Of course he's alive. It's only been nine years."

Ninety. I'd watched Seline's family for days, but only hours had passed at the castle. I swallowed. "Have you seen Hugh lately?"

"Don't change the subject. I'm serious. It's wrong for servants to reprimand their superiors."

"I'm a lady now."

"Hogshit." She tugged on the corset strings.

"Um, air?"

She tugged harder. "Even ladies don't talk back to the prince. Don't you feel any loyalty? Any gratitude?"

"You mean, aside from what is compelled? No, no I don't. Not to the man who got himself turned into a beast and cursed the rest of us. I don't feel loyalty to anyone."

For what had it gotten me? After three orphanages, I'd hoped the castle to be the first constant in my life. Madame, however, had made it clear that there were rows of girls outside, ready to take my place. I'd served faithfully, and my reward? Madame's blighted Command.

No, I did not feel loyalty.

Marie tossed a golden chain. It hit the wall; I hadn't even tried to catch it. "I am not wearing jewelry."

"I don't understand you." Her tone made me hush. I had never made her angry before. Exasperated, yes, but not angry. "You should have worked somewhere else first, where they beat you or starved you."

"Master's hit servants before."

"As a boy. Not now, and certainly not since he's become a beast. He's never even tried."

I bit my lip. I hadn't noticed.

"You don't understand how lucky you are! You've never been hungry, you've never been forced—" She broke off with a half choke. I had guessed what her previous master had made her do with him, years back, but she never wanted to speak of it. "Yes, you should feel gratitude. Gratitude for a place to sleep, for enough food, and most of all, for safety. A bit of yelling and some broken furniture? Spoiled or no, I prefer our prince to any other noble."

We fell silent, the only sound the draining tub in the next room.

"I've never thought of it," I said. "Like that."

"No." She whispered the word. "Our prince is arrogant and self-centered. But so are most people. Go wake Seline. I'll clean your rooms while you wait on her."

"Marie..." I followed her footsteps to my bedroom.

Fresh sheets began to unfold. "Her breakfast will be here soon. Go."

I left my room, closing the door behind me. I turned around and stared at the flat, impassive wood. Marie was the closest friend I had, maybe the only real one ever. If I went back in, though, I'd only upset her further.

I fell into duty and opened the sitting room's curtains. Gray, flat sky with mist greeted me. The castle's weather usually consisted of sunshine, brightness, and joy, but the flowers could not thrive on happiness alone. We'd be confined indoors today. At least Master usually kept to his chambers in the West Wing.

I opened the heavy drapes in Seline's bedroom, letting the thin light do its best to wake her. She stirred, making adorable mmm-ing sounds. *Should I shake her? Or let her sleep?* If I were her, I'd prefer to spend the day in an utter stupor.

A faint knock. I led a kitchen maid with Seline's breakfast through the sitting room to the small table in her bedroom. My lady slept on. Once the girl had gone, I lifted the lid to the porridge so the steam could waft through the room. Then I took a pastry and held it by the sleeping girl's nose.

Seline stretched, her dress from the night before crinkling.

"That smells delicious," she said.

She rubbed her eyes, which had no dark circles despite the tears of the night before. Even her tangled hair managed to look cute. *If she weren't so likable, I'd*

hate her as much as Estelle does. I poured her some of the nasty tea. She made a beeline for it. An acquired taste, definitely.

“There’s no way I can eat all this. Are you hungry?” Her spoon of porridge paused midair. “Unless... I won’t see chewed-up food going into your stomach, will I?”

I laughed. Shame she couldn’t hear. I took the empty seat, and the movement of the chair seemed to satisfy her. She poured me a cup of tea. I frowned and added cream until the color matched the shade of Seline’s skin. That helped.

There was more than enough food for two. In fact, it seemed like the kitchens had expected me to eat with her. I mimicked Seline’s movements, trying to use my spoon and fork and knife as she did, but each try made me feel more of a dreck. She was so graceful. Even the maneuvering of her spoon was like a dance.

The rich food lay heavy in my stomach, smothering my appetite. Or maybe it was Marie’s words. She tended to worry over people, especially me, and she hated conflict. She likely feared that, once everything returned to normal, Madame would strip me of my status and send me packing.

No. There’s more to her anger than that. Here, I eat like some high-born priss, and I take it for granted. I’m abusing the chance everyone else yearns for.

I skipped the sweet roll. It didn’t help.

Seline’s hunger abated, and sadness flitted over her face as she gazed at the window. “I guess I am weather-bound today.”

The heaviness lifted. Marie didn’t know. She didn’t know the lengths the uppers would go to end the curse. Seline had been puppetted here, and I had helped. Slippers, delicious food; Marie wouldn’t appreciate them either if she’d been me. Most of all, Marie didn’t know there was no reason for her to worry. Orphan or no, I had standards, and deceptions and manipulations were below them. The moment the curse ended, I was leaving the castle.

We finished breakfast, then a bath. Seline was searching for something to wear when the seamstress arrived. With one look at the floating measure strip, Seline paled.

The seamstress set a massive book on the dressing table. Whistling a happy tune, she shook the tape and laughed when Seline came over and stretched out her arms. “She’s been through this before. Good. Then it won’t take long. Do you know what she prefers?”

I opened the fat book. Instead of paper, each page was a sample of fabric. Sapphire, rose, buttercream. Smooth and slick and fuzzy. The patterns and options made me dizzy. “Dark colors?”

Seline revolved as the tape wound around her waist. The seamstress clucked her tongue. “Aye, they would do, but so would bright. Pah, anything would look well on this one. I’ll let her choose to her heart’s content. With all the fabrics and jewels replenishing themselves, I have no reason to hold back. It’s not like I’m making anyone else gowns.”

She laughed again; it held an almost desperate edge.

“How many?” Seline asked. I paused as I turned a page. The measuring tape hesitated. “How many dresses.” Her eyes glistened as if she held back tears. She gestured to the wardrobe. “Surely there are enough here? I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Trouble?” The seamstress said to the unhearing girl. “What a dear. Nay, girl, I’m thrilled to be working. That sleep...”

She trailed off. Of course she’d been asleep. Who would she be sewing for? Not Lady Marguerite. The Lady of the Keys, though highest of us, wasn’t high enough

for a lady's seamstress. Not to mention Madame had always worn black, back when she was visible. I wondered what went on with the sleepers, if they dreamed or were aware of time slipping by. But I didn't ask. I was too distracted by Seline's question.

How many?

How many dresses? How many outfits?

How many days?

I swallowed. "Does Lady Alys still keep to the South Hall?"

The measuring tape, now along Seline's arm, jerked. "Yes. She was singing. At least she was when I woke."

I watched the book float to Seline. She thumbed through the fabric with no joy.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't sit here, day after day, watching her unhappiness. *It's my fault, it's my fault*, sang a tiny voice in my heart. What if I could fix my mistake? Free us both? Lady Alys knew of the curse. I didn't trust Madame to have told me everything. With luck, Lady Alys would let me know something that I could use to free myself and, with a lot more luck, free Seline.

"Clau—ahem. *Lady Claudette*," said the seamstress. While she didn't snigger, the amusement in her voice told me she wished to. "I'm to show you how to puzzle out these gowns."

Seline sat on a stool and watched with a blank expression as gowns tousled back and forth. It had to be insanely lonely to watch a silent conversation; to not know what was happening.

And the only thing that can tell her isn't capable of speaking in complete sentences.

I definitely needed to free her.

The seamstress left, and Seline chose her plainest dress to wear for the day. As I dressed her, I noticed the mounting pressure in my chest. The Command. It somehow knew I was going to try to dodge it.

"Could you braid my hair?" Seline said. "And, please, the shoes pinch. I'd prefer to wear my boots until new ones can be made."

I could manage a simple braid. I started to brush her hair. Somehow I needed to learn how to pin it up all fancy.

No. No, I don't need to learn. We are going to escape this.

It took forever—I'd never braided another person's hair before—but finally Seline was dressed. I thought a moment, then decided to tug her to the hallway and ask for directions to the main library. Seline was well-bred enough to enjoy books. I got the information I needed, dragged her through the halls, and tried my best to ignore how every brush, duster, and cloth paused as we passed. Down the main steps, round a corner—

"Oh!" Seline gasped when we entered. "*Oh!*"

I paused to look around. I'd never been in the main library before. I'd heard it was impressive, even for a library. It certainly was large. It smelled of paper and boredom. Seline hurried deeper in as if she'd found an oasis, and I figured she'd be distracted for hours. Maybe days. Possibly weeks.

"I must run an errand," I called. A presence, I assumed the librarian's, called something mmm-ish from behind a shelf. I slipped away, arguing in my head with the Command.

Books make Seline happy. One step away from the library and the magic tightened.

A lady-in-waiting pleases her mistress.

Ha! I thought I felt it faltering.

A happy Seline can fall in love. An unhappy Seline cannot. More steps, more success. Lady Alys was a lady-in-waiting. Madame TOLD me to speak to her if I have questions, and I do. Have questions.

I'd made it mostly down the hallway, and my heart bubbled with joy. I wanted to skip and shout, but I did *not* want other servants to notice me and rush to Madame. So I smothered the urge to hum or sing or dance, and kept to carpeting.

My merriment died when I reached the South Hall.

CHAPTER 9

Before the curse, nobility visited in the East Wing, the lower floor for the running of the castle and the upper servants to live in. The prince and his relatives stayed in the West, where the apartments were even more luxurious, with small exclusive rooms reserved for entertaining the elite. The few nobility who lived year-round had their own space on the West's first floor. Both wings had an intimate feel, maybe even a homey aura to those who lived that kind of life. But the South Hall was completely different. Grand, majestic. The South Hall had entertained all, and had boasted of the prince's power and wealth.

Not anymore. The swish and clatter of servants vanished the moment I entered. My footprints appeared in the dust on the floor, and the stale and musty air tugged at me. As I continued down the hallway, the silence grew thicker, oppressive. Each open door led to a room dark and dull, the ghost of better times. With each step I became less certain of my plan until, finally, I came to the hallway's end.

I'd helped, nine years earlier, as had all of the awake ones. We'd dragged one sleeping body after another to the ballroom. Dozens of them, heavy and oblivious.

My skin crawled as I eased open the great double doors. A breeze squeezed through the crack, tickling the invisible lace at my wrists.

It doesn't matter if it's creepy. I want to be free.

I gave a push.

The breeze became a wind. In, out. In, out. Rhythmic. Peaceful with one person, but ghastly with hundreds. I wanted to bolt, but instead I entered, wading into the sleepers. Every available servant's bed had been moved here. Benches, blankets, and pillows, too, forming makeshift pallets on the floor. Once, nobles decked in jewels had danced in the ballroom at the prince's birthday celebration, the day the king had given the castle to his son. It had been bright and colorful and full of laughter. Now, gray light filtered through the windows onto the beds. Not even the chandeliers could scatter it into sparkles or rainbows. The room resembled a tomb.

All the way at the end, a single chair faced the glass doors to the balcony and gardens. Soft singing collided with the rhythmic, unified breaths. The song had no words, just nonsense syllables. A young woman's voice.

I picked my way through the pallets, taking care to avoid touching anyone. Occasionally my eyes taunted me, making me think I saw the thinnest line of dust outlining a nose, with divots for eyes. I could have kicked one of those poor sleepers, and he wouldn't have even stirred. Worst of all, I *could* collide with one. Unconscious, the enchantment did not work for them. That was why we had moved them. We could hurt them, badly, and they'd be trapped within silent nightmares. If they dreamed at all.

"Lady Alys?" I said in a whisper, not wanting to startle her. The singing continued. I broke free of the beds, almost within touching distance of the chair.

Almost. The smells of sweat and old urine drifted from the seat. "Excuse me, Lady Alys?"

A pause. "It is a beautiful day, is it not? So fine."

Beyond, the windows showed flat gray. "If one prefers rain."

"Tsk. Little rivers of sorrow. Sorrow and diamonds. Water can take so many forms. Breath and ice and liquid. Never the form you wish."

So much for my plan. I thought I'd find her saner than Madame had led me to believe. Still, I needed to try. People often underestimated me. I wouldn't do the same to her. "Can I ask you about the curse? About what happened?"

"We gave him ice, but he didn't like it," Alys said with a sigh. "It's melted now, but it may take too long before it becomes breath."

"That is... unfortunate." Was she talking about Lady Lucrece and Master?

There came the sudden sound of cloth against upholstery, and her voice strengthened as if she turned toward me. "You are?"

"Claudette, my lady."

"Claudette, Claudette. That is a commoner's name."

"Yes, my lady."

"You are *her*." Alys's voice lowered. "Marguerite is a fool. If I could not do it, no guttersnipe could."

I gritted my teeth. Did nobles care about anything other than blood? "Lady Alys, I want to find a way—"

"She ate the chocolate and took the gems, but Sibyla did nothing."

I was positive chocolate had nothing to do with the curse. "Mada—Lady Marguerite said Lucrece did not love the prince. That's why the curse didn't break when she agreed to marry him."

"Lady Catin loves him, but she's asleep, and I cannot wake her up."

"Who?"

"Third pallet, scarlet pillows. I slapped her again and again. Go try."

My jaw dropped in horror. Alys had been beating those asleep? Then her words clicked. "Catin loves Master?"

"I wish it would stop drumming. It tires me, the repetition. But it is better than the light."

I'd lost her again. I itched at the frothy pink lace at my wrists. At least I could not see it. "Did she love him before or after? I guess it had to be before the curse if she's sleeping now. Does Madame know?"

Soft singing. A lullaby in a foreign language. Or babble.

I stamped my foot in frustration. "Would Catin love him as a beast?"

"Did the cats fall asleep?" Alys asked dreamily. "I hated her cat."

"Never mind." This had been a dumb idea. Maybe Madame could wake scarlet-pillow, or Master could, but I didn't have much faith in Lady Crazy's words. *Really, Claudette, what were you hoping for?* I began to pick my way back to the door.

"Stupid girl," she called in singsong after me. "Lucrece was perfectly fine. She said yes! It was his fault. He didn't mean it. He didn't want to."

I paused, straddling a pallet. "What do you mean, he didn't want it? Was he not sincere when he asked? Or are you saying he didn't even try to make her love him?"

"You'll fail!" she said, then spat out a torrent of words in a foreign language. A pillow sailed at me, missing by ten feet.

I escaped and slammed the doors behind me. My footprints in the dust gave me a trail to follow back to the foyer. Alys's words clung to me like the dust.

Master didn't mean it. He didn't want to... what? Marry?

Madame thought Seline needed to fall in love for the curse to break, but what if she was wrong? What if it depended on *Master* falling in love?

I spat out the thought like a maggoty roll. Seline agreeing to marry Master disgusted me, but I could stomach it if she genuinely loved him, even though I'd question her sanity. But if she didn't love him? If she agreed to marry him out of fear or misery or weakness, and the curse broke and trapped her? He'd transform back into a handsome, human prince, but... *ugh*. He'd still be himself.

Alys must be wrong. Master falling in love with Seline is too easy. What man wouldn't? There would be no reason for Sibyla to curse the castle and make him a beast if that were it. The fairy would want the impossible.

I returned to the library. Somehow I needed to see Madame so I could ask about Lady Catin. For Catin to solve all my problems seemed a stretch, for Madame would have ended the curse years ago if she had been able. *Though wouldn't it be hilarious if Catin was good enough? In the castle all along, and Madame missing it...*

My mirth died at the library door. The hope I'd had when I left was gone. Now I'd get to watch Seline. All day. Make her happy, make the Command happy, make my conscious... livable.

The library entrance was quiet and empty, so I headed in the direction I'd last seen Seline wander. With surprise, I learned the ceiling-tall shelves weren't up against walls. Some stood free, twisting to make little reading nooks lit by skylights. The library wasn't large, it was *massive*, and a labyrinth. Who knew so many people thought they had important words to share?

I Sensed. The presence from before, the librarian, was... over there. I couldn't see her; there was a shelf in the way. So I went along it and rounded the corner and... it ended in a nook. I backtracked and tried the other direction. That brought me closer, but the shelves weren't arranged in logical rows, and I kept finding books blocking my way.

"For all that is—" I filled my lungs. "Hoi! I'm lost!"

The librarian's presence drifted this way and that like a drunken maid. A murmuring grew nearer, that same distracted voice. "My, my. No one to visit and then, all in one day, so many. Now, where did she—Oh! Hello! What can I help you find, Miss..."

"Seline," I said. "Do—"

"Forgive me, Miss Seline."

"No, no. The lady I left earlier. The visible one. Her name's Seline. Do you know where she went?"

A long pause, longer than I liked. Then, "Yes! That's right. I remember your voice now. You—" She broke off and to the side, a book shifted ever so slightly. "Poor dear. Fell over a mite, did you?"

Lady Alys and Charles the Butcher had a new friend in crazy. "Please. Can you take me to Seline?"

"Right. She asked about Jocelyn... Bother! What was the last name? I'd never heard of the author before. Embarrassing. Instead, I took her to a few romances..."

I followed the babbling librarian's voice as she murmured authors and titles. After a few turns, we ended up in a cozy corner by a window. Cozy, that is, if the open window let in sunshine instead of damp, depressing air.

An indent in the chair's cushion told us it had once been sat in, and the table in front of it held several books. However...

"So?" I said. "Where did Seline go?"

A book lifted from the pile. "Oh dear. I had hoped she'd enjoy Marcion..."

I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath. "You don't know."

"Maybe with the histories?"

Her voice wandered off, and I struggled against a rising panic in my chest. Was the panic the Command's, or my own? I'd misplaced Seline, the *only* visible person in the castle and—

The librarian misplaced Seline.

The panic didn't lessen, so that meant it was likely my own.

"It's fine, Claudette," I said to myself. "She has to be around here somewhere."

I retraced my steps more than once as I searched the labyrinth. No sign.

A half hour later, the librarian found me. "The lady must be elsewhere, miss. She took a book with her. There is certainly a book missing."

Lovely. The librarian noticed a single book missing, but not a girl. Madame would be livid when she heard Seline wandered the castle without me. The panicky feeling increased as the librarian helped me into the hall. I had to find Seline before someone got word to Madame.

I went to the Rose Suite first. I hurried as much as I dared, hoping not to attract notice. Not many servants traveled the main hallways, anyway, but I peeked through every open door I passed in a hoping-but-not-hoping frenzy that I'd spot a curious woman poking about.

No one was in the Rose Suite.

I sank into one of the chairs in the sitting room and held my head in my hands. Where could she have gone? I prayed not the West Wing. She was allowed to be there, but *he* was there, too, and if she ran into him on her own...

I jumped to my feet.

"Seline, Seline, Seline," I chanted. I clenched my fists and concentrated with all my might. Nothing. No invisible tugs, no sense of *that way*. A lady-in-waiting couldn't Summon her mistress, and with Seline not of the castle, I couldn't Sense her at all.

"I'll have to ask for help," I said.

I hurried into the hallway. The large window at the end showed a few breaks in the clouds. The rain had stopped, leaving everything glistening and slick. I pressed my forehead to the cool glass, willing myself to cry. But crying would help nothing. I had to come up with a plan, decide where to search first—

A tug.

Madame knows. I left the window, deciding it best not to delay. Someone who had seen Seline must have told Madame. Another tug.

Wait. That's not Madame's Summons.

Madame's call was sharp, crisp, precise; Master's, like a beast's. This tug... I could barely feel it. In fact, if I hadn't been standing still, I might not have noticed it at all. The tugs weren't consistent, either. I waited for the next. Waited...

Downstairs. They came from downstairs, from the direction of the library.

Seline, then? Or the librarian. But the librarian had no authority over me, so she shouldn't be able to Summon me. It *had* to be Seline.

Ten minutes later, I was back in the maze of dust-gathering books. I didn't bother finding the librarian this time. I darted back and forth to the infrequent tugs, all the way back to the original chair by the window.

By the open window.

"She didn't!" I rushed to the window and leaned out.

The library was on the main floor of the castle, but there was a level lower for servants and storage. Most of that floor was located underground, so oftentimes a person could easily crawl out of a first-floor window with no danger. Not so here.

On the southern side of the East Wing, from about the library to the end of the wing, the land sloped downward. The castle builders had decided not to fill it in but leave it be, and that had never struck me as inconvenient until now. The drop I stared at was much farther down than a beast length. Below, a stone pathway hugged the castle, framed by hedges that kept it mostly out of sight.

Down and to the right, Seline clung to the wall like a terrified spider.

For a heartbeat I was impressed; she'd tried to escape. A ledge under the window led to a cluster of vines. Some had pulled away—the ones right above Seline—and she clung to a single, stubborn vine that had stayed rooted. Her toes dug into a gap in the stone.

Her booted toes. It all made sense, the plain dress and braided hair and booted toes. She'd been hoping for an opportunity to escape ever since the fitting this morning.

Good for her. Followed quickly by, buckets!

"Please, Claudette," she said, whimpering. Her voice was raw, as if she'd been screaming and given up. "Please, please find me."

"I'm here!" I shouted without thinking. I scowled, rapped on the window pane—and cursed because, no, she couldn't hear any noise I made directly, either. I twisted, grabbed a book, and chucked it out the window.

Seline gasped. "Hello? Oh! Is someone—please! I'm stuck—I'm not sure how long I can hold on. My hands are cramping."

I eyed the distance. She'd survive a fall, but she'd hurt herself, too. If falling wasn't an option and climbing too great a risk...

I considered the ledge. Climbing castles was not a hobby of mine. I searched around for inspiration. Books: useless. The chair: I could break it, but even if I managed to take the length from foot to headrest, it would be just short of her. I needed rope. A tapestry? They hung in the foyer and in several of the rooms I cleaned in the West Wing. That would take time, though, and the tapestries were big and awkward to move. I needed something light, for it would take all my strength to pull Seline in, or to lower her to the ground. Lowering might be safer.

I scratched the place where the lace tickled my wrist. And grinned.

"Thank you for invisibility, Sibyla," I breathed as I started to rip off the dress. I bet I was the first person to ever thank the fairy for the curse. But as buttons popped into visibility and skittered across the floor, I was grateful indeed.

The wonderful thing about ladies' dresses, I realized, was that they used way too much fabric. I began tearing the frothy pink skirt into strips and then the petticoats.

"Hello?" came a feeble call. "Are you still there?"

I paused to flutter pink out the window. Seline gave a happy-relieved sob.

Would the fabric be strong enough? I had ripped it with my hands, after all. I loosely braided three strips together and yanked. It didn't tear. I continued on, braiding and knotting, adding my chemise. I tossed the ever-lengthening rope out the window, measuring as I worked. In the end, only my bodice and the buttons survived, and I shivered in the light breeze, more from habit than true cold.

"Is that—is that a *dress*?" Seline said.

I knotted the end into a loop and anchored it with the chair leg. The armchair was a heavy brute, not massive enough for a perfect anchor, but it did the job.

I pulled most of the rope inside, leaving only a length that could swing to Seline. I leaned out, the cold iron of the windowsill against my skin.

"Here goes," I muttered and swung the end of the rope toward her.

"You want me to let go and grab that?" Seline sounded less than enthusiastic.

I jiggled the rope. "This is all I have."

I stepped on the rope for added strength and swung it toward her again and again. The end bumped her every time. "Come on, Seline. You went to a cursed castle to be a beast's prisoner. This is easy! Surely you played on rope swings as a child."

Back and forth. Back and forth. Seline took a deep breath and a fierce look formed on her face. At the next swing, she grabbed the rope and transferred over.

The fabric went taut; my weight kept it from sliding down, but I couldn't control Seline's motion. She managed to cling on as she bounced and rolled against the wall. The tumbling lessened and I lowered her.

Getting her to safety only took a minute or two, but to my arms, it was much longer. The muscles wobbled when I let go, and it took two tries to lift the chair enough to unloop the dress. I tossed the looped end out the window and glanced outside.

Seline sat against the wall, still gripping the pink-and-white rope. She wouldn't go anywhere.

"What else? Buttons." I searched the floor. The chair sat on a small rug, so most of them hadn't rolled far. A few had scattered under the nearest shelf. I grabbed what I could find, along with the bodice, and paused. Carrying the bodice would render it visible. I put it on without the chemise and gripped the buttons in my fists, winking them out of existence.

Then, bemused, I ran through the castle practically naked.

Outside, the chilly air felt strange on my skin but not really cold. I found the path that hugged the castle and followed it until I came to Seline.

"Don't ever do that again," I said, as I dropped the buttons on a flat stone and scooped up a section of rope.

Seline startled. "Claudette?"

How to tell her yes? I tugged on her skirt twice, then brushed my hand along her braid.

She burst into tears. "It *was* you! I am so sorry. All I could think of was going home. Pappa used to talk about climbing masts and mending sails, even during storms, so I thought surely I could manage a little climb out of a window? Then my foot slipped, and the vine gave way and—" She shuddered. "I'm not as brave as I thought."

"Psh," I said. I began to undo knots and unbraid the rope. The panic and fear of the afternoon seeped away, leaving me trembling but cheerful.

Seline didn't see the trembling. She had buried her face in her knees. "I was a fool. It's just—Beast never said I'd be able to leave. It became real this morning, while I was choosing fabrics, and never... Never is a long time."

She unfolded, tears on her cheeks, and caught sight of the unraveling rope. "Let me help you."

I didn't protest as she picked up the other end. It'd take long enough to piece the dress back together. Marie would notice its absence, and I couldn't risk someone coming across its tatters.

"I won't try to escape again," Seline whispered as she unbraided. "Just, please, don't tell Beast."

I laughed aloud. "Trust me, he's the *last* person I'd tell. Rather, Madame is the last person. Beast would just break something. If he cared at all."

It'd be a miracle, though, if Madame didn't find out about what had happened. I hoped that because no one had come, it meant that no one had seen. I glanced up. The hedges that lined the path shielded us from view. Up high, the window was still open, but perhaps the gardeners weren't around due to the earlier rain.

“Goodness, this *is* your dress.” Seline looked at me without seeing, the horror shaping her mouth into a circle. “You’re not wearing anything, are you?”

I couldn’t answer. Instead, I took two edges of my chemise and matched them together.

Where the fabrics met, my vision seemed to blur, as if I’d been staring at the same spot for too long. With a blink, all returned to normal, except now the frayed edges had joined, and the fabric looked new.

“Well.” Seline shook her head. “Well.”

I grinned as she began to piece strips together. This time the curse didn’t seem to care that she wasn’t of the castle. The fabric mended in her hands as easily as it did in mine.

“I guess it makes sense,” Seline said as we worked side by side. “It’s not like you’re trading with other cities.”

“Not to mention, we’d be out of furniture with Master’s tantrums,” I said. Though maybe he’d have started behaving long ago if he was at risk of having no furniture. “I do wish you could hear me.”

The clouds continued to scatter as we worked in silence. The stone wall of the castle lightened as it dried, and the sunshine became the suggestion of warmth on my skin, though if I looked down, it shone right through me and onto the ground. Sometimes, the curse was downright weird.

In the end, I hadn’t found all the buttons, but I decided not to go back and look for them. I also decided I couldn’t let Seline out of my sight again. If she had fallen...

I didn’t want to imagine it. Her escaping, that was a more pleasant fantasy. But even that, with Master’s wrath, and Madame’s...

I could well imagine them sending a servant to ‘haunt’ Reynaud’s family until Seline returned or they fled the kingdom.

“I am so very sorry,” Seline said again. Her finger lingered on the gap of a missing button.

“No one will notice,” I said, “as long as it’s in the wardrobe and I refuse to wear it again.” I pulled the dress over my head and fastened what buttons I could reach. She watched in that thoughtful way of hers as the dress disappeared. “I won’t tell Beast. I’d try to escape, too, if I were you.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” she said as the last ruffle vanished. “For both saving my life and keeping my secret. Somehow, I’ll do you right.”

I glanced upward to where she’d clung and gave her hand a small squeeze. “We are even. I’m the one who got you into this, after all. But we’ll get out of it. Somehow.”

We returned inside, together.

CHAPTER 10

To our relief, he didn't show that night. Nor the next. We spent the two peaceful evenings perfectly content, with Seline telling stories of her childhood as I choked down tea so she would know I was listening.

On the third night, I lingered in the doorway of the drawing room as Seline went to her chair. She'd not tried to escape since the library incident. I'd even slept in the Rose Suite's sitting room to make sure she didn't slip away during the night. I was tempted to believe her, but I'd experienced my share of broken promises.

Such as, 'I'll love you forever.'

Stupid Robert.

Still. I'd never met a lady like Seline. She hadn't launched into despair when the first dress arrived, either. She wore it now: a deep green taffeta with cream accents. Surely I could slip away tonight after she went to bed.

"Bertram?" I called. The invisible footman's presence paused as he walked to his customary bench to wait. "Would you be so kind," I'd picked up the phrase from Seline, "as to give a message to Madame?"

"But of course." He sounded pleased. "Anything I can do for you or the lady."

The formality itched worse than lacy sleeves. "Thank you. Um. Tell her I need—wish—to speak with her, when she next has time. Well, any time she's available if it's after Seline goes to sleep. Which is usually around the tenth candle notch."

He responded with the same polite enthusiasm, and I fled into the drawing room. There I took my seat in the corner, where I'd stay until it became clear Beast wouldn't show.

Tonight, I'll finally be able to talk to Madame about Lady Catin.

My time with Lady Alys seemed like years ago, not days. Life with Seline was not nearly so dire when Master didn't show. It was even pleasant, and I began to suspect I'd miss Seline if she left. But Madame's Command disliked the lack of progress over Seline's falling in love, and I didn't like its pressure one bit.

Which is why I relaxed when Master arrived, even as annoyance prickled my scalp.

He approached Seline, whose eyes widened in surprise as she shot to her feet. She curtsied, he grunted, and then he sat in his chair without looking at her.

My lips thinned. He could at least be polite and pretend interest in her. Indifference *was* better than growling, but even we servants knew not to ignore a guest.

Seline spoke. "Beast, if it pleases you, I brought a book to read aloud this evening."

Master grunted in a way that sounded approving.

She waved to my corner. Her visit to the library hadn't been a total disaster. She had picked out a book after all, and she had brought it each evening. Now I realized,

as I brought it to her, she'd planned this all along. If she read aloud, he did not need to speak. No awkward conversation, no dangerous topics.

Best of all, if she's focused on the page, she may forget he's there. Forgetting led to comfort, comfort to familiarity. Surely that could lead to love? I wished I had a successful experience to draw from. My short relationship with Robert had been far from spell-shattering.

Seline's clear voice began. It was a nice, neutral story about war and intrigue. No love, no monsters, no magic. She read with varying pitch and some degree of passion, but I did not follow. Books bored me. I had never eavesdropped on readings, as some of the other servants had. I had never sighed at my illiteracy, even when Marie learned to read.

Music, though, that was different. If Seline played anything I would weep for joy. *Perhaps I'll lead her to a music room tomorrow.* My heart had trembled every time I dusted the large mahogany grand in the Harmony Room. Performances I spied on. Not readings.

With little else to do, I watched Master. I had no idea what the expressions on his twisted face meant. I could recognize anger—lips pulled away from fangs were fairly obvious—but for every other emotion I was clueless. He stared at the fire, eyes unfocused. Did he see the pictures of the battlefield, painted by Seline's words? Did he worry about her opinion of him? Clearly, no. I'm sure Seline hadn't noticed—she looked at anything *but* him—but I sure did. The edges of his cloak, frayed. The corner of his sleeve, stained. He did not dress like a man wishing to woo a maid. He didn't dress like a prince, despite the expensive fabrics. He dressed like a beast.

I almost pointed it out to him right then, but one glance at Seline and my words died. Criticizing him would be satisfying, but not while Seline could hear his reaction. Besides, even the Command realized it was a poor idea, for I felt no compulsion to speak.

The moment the clock announced the hour, Master stirred in his seat. Seline paused.

"Late," he said in that barbaric way of his.

Seline put a marker in the book.

"Thank you," he said, the words sliding roughly off of his tongue. "For reading."

"I am glad you enjoyed it, my lord."

"Beast."

"Ah." She gathered her skirts and curtsied.

"Perhaps you should bow?" I suggested before thinking.

For the first time that night, I saw something other than vacancy in his eyes. To think one small comment could snap him into surliness. "Your maid, impertinent."

"Is she?" Seline perked with a smile, a real one that made her glow.

"You... like that?" he asked. He couldn't have sounded more baffled had Seline been amused that her maid had a third head or ate raw mice.

"I enjoy people with wit, who choose to live life instead of watching it," Seline said. "What did she say?"

He rumbled low, but Seline did not flinch. She giggled, with a gloved hand poised in front of her mouth.

"I see." Her mirth died. "Was it about me?"

By the small flash of fear I saw in her brow, I guessed she worried I'd spoken of her escape, and that Beast's annoyance was him thinking I jested.

"No. You..." He paused. "Perfect."

Her hand fell to her side, and her cheeks flushed. "There is no such thing."

"Modest. Humble." Again, the words sounded foreign on his tongue.

Her hand gripped her skirt, and she curtsied again, her jerky movement making the taffeta crinkle. "At first glance, perhaps, but no further. I take my leave."

I hurried after her. My lady could be angry! Her neck, kinked, giving her chin a challenging tilt. Her eyes, narrowed. She strode down the hallway like a queen on a rampage, out of the West Wing and into the East, never slowing.

"Claudette, are you here?" she said through her teeth.

I gave her skirt a little tug as I trotted.

She halted in the hallway. "Do you think I am perfect?"

Honestly, I thought her pretty close. Surely she had flaws, but some people's flaws were more preferable than others'.

"See, I am not perfect!" she exclaimed as she picked up her skirts and continued her march down the hallway. "I keep forgetting I cannot hear you. I cannot hear anything in this accursed place except for the thing that scares me to death."

I barely slipped through the Rose Suite's door before she slammed it. She ripped off her gloves and flung them on the sitting room's sofa without a pause. Then she stormed into her bedroom, and halted. She stopped so suddenly, I walked right through her.

"Roses," she said. "Lovely." There was more than a hint of sarcasm. There, on the breakfast table: an elaborate, rose-stuffed bouquet. "Was this your idea? I don't want them. I don't want to see another rose in my life. I want—I want—Orchids. Or daffodils. Yes, daffodils. They have some life in them. Daffodils and daisies and nice, happy flowers. Not cruel ones."

I snatched the offending vase and spirited it to my room. I could pass the flowers off to Marie in the morning, and, through her, get word to Seline's chambermaid to not repeat the mistake. Really, though, how could the other servants not realize the cruelty of roses? Maybe Madame had ordered it. She had chosen the dreaded Rose Suite as Seline's chambers.

When I returned to Seline's bedroom, she had kicked off her lady slippers and was lying on the bed. She stared with despondence at the ceiling. I stood for long moments, helpless. If I smoothed her hair, as I had done before, she'd slap me away in that mood. It wasn't the right response, anyway.

Then I had an idea. Grinning, I slipped into her dressing room. Where had I seen it?

There. On top of the wardrobe. A collection of hats, including one with long, silly feathers. I returned to the bedroom, creeping until I came to her feet sticking off the edge of the bed.

Seline gave a whoop of surprise as her feet shot upward. She bounded to the edge of the bed and collapsed in giggles when she saw the ridiculous hat.

"You—you little—" She batted the hat away when I tickled her elbow. "You imp! Impertinent, indeed. Whatever possessed you?"

I laughed with her, triumphant. The last thing I wanted was her foul mood to pull her back into depression. She had too much time here for moping. Hearing her laugh put joy into my heart.

Once she could breathe evenly again, I helped her exchange her dress for a linen nightgown woven finer than the best tablecloth.

"I'm sorry," Seline said. We sat on the bed, me brushing her hair. "I hear it often. Perfect. But you know what?" She looked over her shoulder, her eyes shining. "If I were a boy, I'd run away and join some crew on a ship. That's not a proper thought for a girl at all, is it? But that's what my father did. I'd follow in his

footsteps, traveling from one kingdom to another, until I managed to buy my own boat. Then I'd really see the world."

She sobered and traced the threads of a rose on the coverlet. "Pappa always told me it wasn't exciting. Mostly he did the same thing day after day, swabbing the deck and repairing sails. He'd burn under the sun, bored, and then a hurricane would come. That wasn't exciting but terrifying, because people are washed overboard and are lost forever. He said the towns began to look the same, except with different-skinned people, and he started to yearn for a home.

"I think, now, that Pappa was right. I had thought this would be my adventure." A tear darkened the rose fabric to mauve. "An adventure I tried to escape the first day. What a success that was. Good thing I never joined a crew for real."

"Bah," I said. The silky strands of hair slid through my fingers. I could brush her hair every day of my life, it was so soothing. "If it hadn't rained and made the ledge slick, you'd have made it."

She continued on, her voice soft and distant. "My adventure is less than spectacular, isn't it? Boring, with no one to talk to but a beast, and he mostly growls." She fell silent, then suddenly grinned. "I guess I better not forget the invisible servants. I never dreamed of being ambushed by absurd hats. If that's not excitement, I don't know what is."

A little tug at my navel. It distracted me enough that I didn't react to her compliment. The rough Summons unsettled me.

"He must have been lonely," Seline murmured. I ignored the tugging so I could focus on her words. "I've been thinking lately. Why? Why did Beast react as he did? I mean, the rose was clearly enchanted, but so is the entire castle. I think Beast demanded a prisoner because he was lonely, and he didn't know how to ask Pappa to stay."

I put down the brush. "If he was lonely, he could talk to any of us, least of all Lord Antoine."

She scratched her neck; my breath had disturbed her hair ever so slightly. "I've decided to try to be nicer to him. He cannot help being a beast."

I laughed, but not out of humor. "He doesn't deserve you."

She crawled to the pillow and slipped under the covers. The magical tugging became jerking. I didn't like it one bit. Long ago, a man had taken my orphanage fishing. One of the boys had been too impatient to sit there and had kept yanking the line as if it would hurry the fish. He didn't catch anything.

I am already caught. I blew out the candle as Seline muttered goodnight.

Once I entered the hallway, I knew where to go. That childish, impatient tug was not Madame's. It came from directly west, not slightly west and below.

I've decided to try to be nicer to him. I recalled Seline's words as I hurried down the hall, and snorted. It really ought to be the other way around. But perhaps that was why he Summoned me? To check on Seline? I couldn't think of any other reason. He must surely have seen the anger that had rippled over her entire body.

A smile replaced the disgust. Ah, Seline. *She may not think she is perfect, but I am convinced. How could Master not fall in love with her? Gentle, long-suffering, considerate. Playful and intelligent.*

The next tug nearly brought me to my knees. I swore as I remembered that Master falling in love wasn't the problem. It was getting Seline to fall in love with *him*. I lifted my skirt and began to jog, hoping it didn't bother my leg too much.

The Summons led me to the Harmony Room. Walking inside, I felt an unexpected pang of loss. Of all the rooms I had cleaned, only the Harmony Room I'd loved. It was a large, airy space, painted in pale greens and whites, the nature-

themed tapestries subdued yet pleasant. The sofas and chairs were the most comfortable of all my rooms, designed for long performances. A golden harp stood in one corner, but my beloved dominated the room: the mahogany grand, whose handsomeness was only second to the music it created.

The room was in darkness now. I'd never been there after dark, and it unsettled me to see everything in shadows and moonlight. Master stood by the window, staring at the gardens below.

He didn't even turn. "I waited."

For all of what, three seconds, before he began to yank? Already my spine prickled in agitation. "I wait on Seline."

He looked over his shoulder at the space where I stood by the door. "Impertinence."

Depending on your perspective. "I'm here now. How may I serve you?" I didn't quite manage to hide my sarcasm. I did try, I really did.

"Stop disrespecting. Me."

I waited for the strangling sensation of a Command, but it didn't come. I decided to not press the issue, lest he choose to make it a Command. I softened my voice. "Forgive me. I am tired and..." *The less you say, Claudette, the less he can find irritating.* "Forgive me."

"Earlier?" he asked. "You tired, earlier?"

I frowned as I puzzled out his cryptic attempt at a sentence. "You mean, with Seline? What did I... oh. I asked you to bow. I was thinking of Seline, Master, how you could make her feel welcome."

He whirled around. "Not the ask. The manner."

Goodness. I couldn't even remember how I'd acted. And I wished he'd speak like a civilized person. Like a prince. "Is that all you Summoned me for?"

"You embarrass me. Your prince!"

"No one hears me but you. And you embarrass yourself. Do you never think of Seline? Aren't you going to ask about her?"

"Why?"

My jaw dropped. "You didn't notice? She stormed out of the room, furious."

Master waved a paw as if dismissing the issue. "Awkward. Everything."

My face grew hot. He had upset her, and he didn't even care. "A burden. That's how you see her? Someone you have to remember to be human for?"

"Lady Marguerite made you too high," he spat as he dropped to all fours. He began to pace between the piano and the chairs. It was the only place open enough for him to prowl. "Rude, no tact. No one speaks like you."

"Because they're afraid you'd shred them to pieces."

He paused by the piano, his lip raised in a sneer.

I straightened. "I'm not afraid of bullies."

"Bully?" He barked a laugh. "Look in mirror."

My face flushed again, this time from shame. Bullies manipulated people, hurt them. I hadn't created the strain between Seline and Estelle, but I may have increased it beyond repair. And I had tricked poor Reynaud... But Master wasn't speaking about them. He meant himself.

"Bullying and chastising are two different things." I scowled at a nearby chair. My leg ached from jogging, but I couldn't sit unless he did. "Is there anything else, or may I go?"

His hand lashed out, an explosive movement of pure anger. I jerked forward with a cry, but he managed to keep from striking the piano. Barely.

"You..." He panted. His paw-hand closed into a fist.

Calm him down. A servant could repair the instrument, but it'd break my heart to see him smash the piano. I tried my best to sound meek. "We'll compromise. You try to think more of Seline, of her situation, and I will try to be subservient."

He grunted. Disbelief.

I sighed. "Or not."

He said nothing, but his hand unclenched. A dog-padded, furry finger caressed the piano.

"You like music," I said.

"Yes." I barely heard the reply.

Fuzzy memories of life before the curse swirled in my mind. I used to clean this room in the morning, because a tutor came to teach the prince in the afternoon. Sometimes I cleaned it a second time, for an evening performance.

I walked to the corner of the room. A tapestry of a meadow hung against the wall. I pushed the heavy cloth to the side, revealing a cranny just big enough for a person. "I used to hide here and listen."

"What?" He stepped away from the piano and his hand reformed into a fist.

"Not to you. At night. If I finished my rooms early, I slipped through the servants' door here, crawled behind this table, and hid behind the tapestry. No one ever noticed because they were focused on the piano. Or harp. Or violin. Once there was a flute, but I didn't care much for it."

"Hmph."

I gritted my teeth. "Even we lessers can enjoy music."

"Always," he muttered. "Always like this."

"The orphanages did not like me, either." I crossed my arms, then realized it was a useless gesture. I lost so much, being invisible. "Gah! Just answer me. Will you try? I will curtsy and simper and do whatever you wish, as long as you act in the interest of Seline." Then, before I could stop myself, "And the castle."

The fist swung around, smashing the table by the piano. "My castle!"

"Then behave like it is yours!" Lady Alys's accusation, as to why Lucrece had failed to break the spell, came roaring to mind. "Act as if you care!"

"You cannot—" His head swung back and forth as if he searched for something satisfying to smash in place of me. His cloak billowed, but instead of feeling frightened by his size, I only felt disdain at the cloth's tatters. "Leave. Leave *now*."

And I did. One minute I stood in the music room. The next, I stood in my new bedroom, all the way across the castle. The room spun wildly, and I fell over, and it still kept spinning. Somehow, the magic had *sent* me here, and my poor brain did not know how to interpret the whooshing. The silver ring hadn't made me ill when it brought Seline and me to the gate. But then, it hadn't been ordered by an angry beast, either.

You asked for it, didn't you? I swallowed hard, telling my stomach to stay put. *Come on, Claudette. Feel chastised.* I didn't. I felt tired and disgusted and annoyed. Anything but sorry.

I lay on the floor until my head finally cleared. Then I prepared for bed. But even the soft mattress couldn't convince me to sleep. Master's arrogance and temper repeated over and over in my mind until a clear, precise Summons interrupted my fuming.

The Lady of the Keys. I'd completely forgotten. Bertram must have got the message to her.

Perfect. I'll tell Madame about Lady Catin, and I won't ever have to listen to him again. I was so happy with Madame's Summons, I didn't even bother to change out of my nightdress.

Her voice lashed me the moment I entered the lace-encrusted sitting room.

"I made you a lady. I expect you to act like one."

I froze. "Did I upset Seline?"

"Seline? No. Your prince, your future king!" Keys rattled. Madame stepped past me and slammed the door. "Twice now you have upset him!"

My temper flared again. "He upsets himself. He doesn't even try to be likable. To anyone."

"You dare to speak of your prince—" An inhale. Madame had caught what I hadn't said outright. "Has he upset Seline?"

I snorted. "She heard his first tantrum, and it scared her to death. Since then? Everything puts him on edge. He's certainly not bothering to woo her. He barely talks to her. His clothes are dirty and torn. Seline can't be happy and in love with a *beast*."

Madame didn't say anything for a moment. "Perhaps if you tried harder to be polite when you drew attention to his shortcomings..."

"I am not—" I couldn't lie. I was impertinent, yes, but not a liar. "Very well."

"His Highness will not be likable if you're impudent. He will be tense every time you enter his presence." Madame strode across the room and opened the top drawer of a writing desk.

This was my moment. "Then maybe I shouldn't be lady-in-waiting. And maybe Seline shouldn't have to fall in love with an animal. Lady Alys told me that Lady Catin is in love with Master. What if you wake her?"

Madame paused as she withdrew two papers. "Lady Catin loved His Highness's title. She wanted to be queen."

"Are you sure? Perhaps Alys knows something we don't."

The drawer shut with finality. "Only His Highness can wake one of the nobility, and he will not."

"Why? Is she impertinent?"

Madame didn't laugh. "He has already refused her. Twice. The second time, he said he would rather marry the scullery maid."

My small hope deflated to nothingness. I leaned against the back of a chair. "Oh."

"Oh, indeed." The papers came toward me and thrust forward in the vicinity of my chest. "Here. This is the reason I Summoned you."

I took the two sheets. Someone had drawn a series of numbered boxes, with a few of the top boxes crossed out. I did know my numbers; I was paid with numbers. Yet I didn't understand why Madame was counting boxes, nor why she repeated herself on two sheets of paper.

"What's—"

"It's a calendar. Each box represents one day. Those are the days until the anniversary of—of—" Madame took a deep breath. "Of Sibyla's decree."

My hands went cold. "Two pages. There are only two months left?"

"Two months is nearly two years outside. And no, we do not even have that much time. If you count, there are only six weeks."

My entire body went cold. "No one falls in love that fast."

"You are certainly unromantic." Her keys jangled to the hallway's door, but she didn't open it yet. "The calendar is yours. A reminder that every time you incite His Highness's wrath, you lose a day. Or more. After your spat tonight, he smashed the piano. The apothecary had to drug him. It may be days before he emerges to see Seline."

He smashed the *piano*? Did he truly have no self-control? The little boxes were too few. Two months, two years. “What happened to His Majesty? The king.”

“I do not know, and I do not care. It does not concern us.”

Not now, but later. If the impossible did happen, Seline would be queen. She’d be a fantastic queen. “Someday, the outside will matter again.”

The door opened. “Only if that tongue of yours doesn’t ruin it, Claudette. Do not disappoint me again.”

The threat couldn’t be more plain, nor vague. I folded the calendar, slipped it in my pocket, and obeyed her dismissal. Though she could not see me, nor I her, I felt Madame’s eyes upon me all the same.

“I won’t disappoint you again,” I said. But the door had already closed.

CHAPTER 11

*T*rapped.

The word echoed in my mind. I'd fallen asleep quickly enough, but I woke in the middle of the night. *Trapped*. I always had been, but the calendar with its neat little boxes had made it somehow more real. Six weeks until, if Madame were correct, all of us were trapped for eternity.

I gave up on sleeping. The problems loomed in the darkness. Problems I must solve.

I sat up and rummaged for a match. Color flared into the room with the small light. I stared at the steady flame. If Catin wasn't an option, what then? I couldn't encourage Seline to try another escape. I hated to admit it, but it was the only solution.

Seline had to fall in love.

I flopped back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. I was not an expert on love. My short romance with Robert was all the experience I'd had. I'd never really even watched two people in love. So... Robert. What had created that giddy, dreamy feeling? What had drawn me to him?

He made me feel pretty. I grimaced. *Until he couldn't see me*. Then it became obvious the only thing he'd thought pretty was my cleavage. Pretty wasn't good enough for Seline, though. Seline knew too well her own beauty, and Master—if he ever spoke like a man—did not seem capable of complimenting anyone sincerely, let alone with charm.

Surely there was something else?

Robert had sent me sidelong winks whenever I had passed the stables on my afternoon off. Master did not strike me as a winking sort of beast.

Robert had sent me flowers and trinkets. Again, I couldn't imagine Master giving gifts. And if I gave them, pretending they came from him, his behavior would expose the lie.

Well. Robert was a bucket of dung, so perhaps trinkets and winks and compliments had nothing to do with love, anyway. Maybe instead of focusing on Master, I should concentrate on Seline. What did she want in a man? Er, beast. He didn't have much to offer. *Master doesn't even have a dashing, crooked smile in his favor*.

By the time true morning came, the candle had burned out and I'd gone near batty with frustration. My door opened, a fresh candle lit the room, and a dressing gown landed on my head.

"Urmph!" I wrestled the fabric off of my face. "Good morning to you, too."

The dressing room door opened. "What do you want to wear today? Or do you care?"

I threw off the covers. The dressing gown fell to the floor. "You can pick."

I almost added, *Miss Grumpy*. But I impressed myself by holding my tongue.

Marie made an exasperated sound. Something stupid, frilly, and yellow emerged from the oak wardrobe.

She heard about Master smashing the piano. And she believes it my fault.

I grimaced at the dress and resigned to be a canary, comforting myself that at least it'd turn invisible.

As Marie dressed me, I grew more certain she was furious, which meant she was, in fact, worried. The best I could do was wait for it to blow over. Or get Seline to make us all visible.

"How did you fall in love with Hugh?" I asked. Marie's romance far outdid mine, and I expected her kitchen boy to propose the moment the spell broke. She had to have decent advice, and maybe it'd distract her out of her worry.

Marie paused as she searched the wardrobe's lower drawers for slippers. "You are *not* going after Robert again."

I made a face, both at her comment and at the yellow shoes that emerged. "Never. But I want to know. How do people fall in love?"

"The footman?"

"Just answer the question."

The slippers dropped in front of me, and the air whooshed as she returned to the bedroom. The dressing gown lifted off the floor, and I took a step backward in the cramped room.

The dressing gown hovered in front of the dresser for long moments. Then a drawer opened. "Love's complicated."

Didn't I know it. "But you and Hugh are happy. Surely you have some advice. Does he make you feel pretty? Clever?"

The dressing gown folded. Even annoyed, Marie always did an excellent job. "Love isn't all 'me.' I mean. Yes. He makes me feel pretty and smart and loved. But love is much more than feeling good."

I considered that. I'd felt mighty good with Robert, until the end.

"Love is... commitment. Despite feelings." The gown slipped into the drawer. Then the drawer slammed shut. "It's about the *other* person. It's caring so much about another person that his welfare comes before your own, and he considers you before himself. Yes. That's love. So, before you go flirting, try thinking about *anyone* before yourself. If you manage that, then you can try for a beau."

I bit my tongue. It bled. According to her own advice, I could now go courting, because I was not snapping back. "There's more going on than you know, Marie."

"Oh? And you're not telling your best friend because..."

"Because I can't."

She whooshed past me again. The sheets stripped from the bed.

Because you are in no mood to listen. Maybe I could tiptoe around Madame's Command for silence, but not with Marie like this. Once she calmed, then perhaps I could get through to her that I *was* the considerate one in this mess.

"I'm waking Seline," I half-growled.

Marie didn't answer as I left. I shoved open the sitting room drapes and went to Seline's room. I didn't open the curtains there, however, but paused to watch Seline sleep. With admirable effort even Marie could praise, I dismissed the angry parts of her advice and focused instead on the useful parts.

Consider others. Seline already thought of Beast. Aside from non-grumpy Marie, Seline was the most considerate person I'd ever known.

There's nothing I can do with her. It all comes down to him. The prince who didn't even dress decently for himself. I wrinkled my nose. Madame was right. Any

uneasiness he felt around me threatened everything with Seline. I'd have to be painstakingly nice. Help him feel more comfortable as I—meekly—encouraged him to be a gentleman. And if I caught him looking... *Cuddly? Cute? Adoring?* All great descriptions for puppies, but not for him. *If he looks remotely fall-in-love-able, I'll try to direct her attention to him.*

It was a plan, and already the relief of pursuing the Command filled me. Now I just had to pull it off.

I opened the curtains and sunshine flooded Seline's room.

CHAPTER 12

The day passed peacefully, as did the night, for Beast did not attend. Seline never commented; he'd spent two nights away after his first visit. While he must be lonely, the evenings were a trial for him. Thus, the second night without him passed without concern as well.

On the third day, Seline asked to return to the library. She exchanged the book Beast had no interest in for another. Early evening, when I dressed her for dinner, she picked one of her new dresses: a luscious brown silk. In the drawing room, I did not take his chair but went to mine in the corner.

He did not come.

Seline sat, stiff, staring at the clock. At a quarter after, I changed chairs and poured us tea. She drank a cup, but I didn't think she tasted it.

"He's not coming, is he?" she said. "Do you think... of course, one instance does not make a habit, yet... It has been two nights without him. I was certain Beast would come tonight." Her cheeks flushed. "I dare say, I had hoped, a little, that he'd come tonight."

I perked at that. Seline wanted to see him?

"Sometimes I tire of my own voice." She set the empty cup on the table.

I leaned over the massive arm of his chair to pour her another cup. Part of me was dismayed at her words. I talked to her all the time, but Sibyla's magic made it not matter. A silent, expressionless companion could hardly be a friend.

I pushed aside thoughts of myself. Seline *wanted* to visit with the Beast. It was progress, and I should rejoice.

Seline picked up the cup, set it down, rubbed her temples. "Do you think, Claudette, there is a reason why he is not here?"

At her question, Madame's warning hit me like a slap. *Every time you incite His Highness's wrath, you lose a day. Or more.* There was no doubt I'd angered him. He'd smashed the piano. And that had upset him so much that the apothecary had drugged him calm. The other servants whispered about that night still. Loudly. I'd overheard it again and again while with Seline.

For the first time, regret pooled in my chest. I didn't like it.

Seline didn't say anything more. She just stared at the small fire in the enormous hearth. I excused myself. Marie still didn't talk to me, and the servants' gossip I'd overheard hadn't changed over the past few days. I knew for a fact that parlormaid rarely had true gossip, anyway.

But footmen, especially a footman selected to wait on Seline...

Bertram stood, as always, a respectful distance down the hall. Close enough to hear a call, distant enough for eavesdropping on the lady to be difficult. To think, I'd envied him back when Madame had chosen him to wait on Reynaud. Back then, I hadn't realized how much of a footman's life involved standing still.

“How may I help my lady?” he asked once I’d spoken his name.

Never did I feel more an impostor than when Bertram called me ‘lady.’ I quickly Sensed. The hall seemed clear, but Sensing around corners was nigh impossible, so I lowered my voice. “Beast—Master—His Highness. Ahem. He is not coming tonight?”

“It appears not, and I have not received orders that he will be late.” A pause. “Is Lady Seline distraught?”

“Disappointed.” I picked my words with care. I usually gossiped with girls, servants much lower than him. Surely the uppers gossiped, but I had the tiniest worry it was low class. But was it gossip if the news helped me help Seline? “Do you... That is, have you...” I didn’t know how a lady would phrase the question. “Is he coming tomorrow?”

A long pause. Bertram was thinking about his words. A habit I needed to adopt.

“He had an outburst several nights ago,” Bertram said, as if I may not know. Kind of him, to pretend the gossip drifting around didn’t blame me. “He has at least recovered partially, for he has spent large swaths of the time since with Lord Antoine.”

“Oh?”

“Every time I’ve reported to his lordship, it’s been in His Highness’s sitting room, in his personal chambers.”

Bertram ranked higher in the castle than I expected, if he reported directly to the Lord of Accounts. An upper footman, then, in line to train as a valet or some other coveted position. A flush heated my cheeks. I ought to give up my attempts at proper lady-speech entirely. He’d listened to real ladies talking.

Bertram’s voice lowered, a bit breathless and rushed. “His Highness seemed in his right mind, and my lordship’s demeanor has been more positive as of late.”

My flush deepened, touched. That was true information, and by his awkwardness, I doubted Bertram often spoke of what he’d observed. “I see. Thank you.”

He clacked his heels together: a sort of an audible version of a bow I’d overheard the uppers do. I gave my skirts a good rustle as I made a curtsy, and I returned to Seline in the drawing room.

She still stared at the fire. I’d noticed the darkness of the room before, but it seemed more pervasive with her there. Shadows swallowed everything except the two chairs and table within the small fire’s glow. The wall sconces, and the candelabras, they were never lit. I wondered if Seline wished they were.

I shook myself. “Good news. Lord Antoine is happy. If he’s happy, then something’s going well. I’m betting Beast will return soon.”

Seline’s second cup of tea had not been touched. The clock chimed the hour, and she stood to leave.

I hated how, while I worried for her and watched her melancholy, the magical weight that always pressed on me lightened at the news I’d spoken. It didn’t seem right for me to have relief while she stayed distressed. I rather hoped I’d never get used to the contrast.



S but I saw the questions behind her smiles. We ate breakfast, and I bathed and dressed her. Then I tugged her through the East Wing to a room I’d searched out the previous night. A room with something new to do,

something to distract.

"Is this what you wanted me to find?" she laughed as we entered the small music room. A petite grand piano sat in the corner, by a scaled-down harp. Violins leaned in stands beside the right wall. A few flutes were encased nearby. The clear day lit the room, making the pale-yellow walls downright cheery. "Goodness, the way you prodded me, I thought you were leading me to a room studded with diamonds."

Her teasing pleased me, but I preferred the overwhelmed gasp she'd had for the library. But then, the room *was* small.

"Do you play?" Seline asked. She gestured at the instruments. "If so, I'd very much like to listen."

I walked over to the piano and pulled out the bench. I sat, took a deep breath, and then banged on the keys with zealous awfulness.

Seline fell into a chair as she laughed. Long after I finished my 'song,' she continued to giggle until tears streamed down her cheeks. "I dare say, Lady Claudette, I have not heard a master such as yourself for a long time." She winked at the piano bench, though I'd already stood up. "Perhaps sometime you can accompany me as I sing an aria. I am quite tone deaf."

Seline had a flaw? Disappointment hit me harder than I expected. I brushed my hand against the harp, the only instrument that tolerated incompetence. Notes, cluelessly happy, rippled into the room.

"Are there any ladies who play?" Seline asked. She sighed and swept her hair behind her ear. "I do wish you could speak. I'll have to ask Beast—"

"No, no, no. Don't think about him."

Too late. Seline's forehead had creased. I plucked a few more notes. Useless.

She came over and put her hands on the strings, shushing them. "I have been thinking about my outburst the other night. I do not believe I said anything cruel, but I don't remember clearly. And I worry. I worry I have embarrassed him."

I stared. "You? Embarrass him? He does that on his own."

"He did not mean to anger me, yet I stormed out." Seline squeezed the bridge of her nose with one hand, and the fingertips of her other hand gripped the harp strings. "He is a beast, after all. I cannot expect him to understand as a gentleman might. He is so very uncomfortable around me, and my tone that night—"

Quick as a wind, I stroked her hair. "You are fine. He didn't even notice. His issue is not with you." It was with himself, of course. His impossible temper, his determination to be offended... by me. "I can't even breathe without upsetting him."

The smile returned to her lips, and she brought a hand to her hair. "Thank you. Would you send Beast a message? Tell him I am sorry. Maybe you could explain..." She trailed off, and the corner of her mouth quirked. "Maybe you ought to have someone else explain. Since he thinks you're so impertinent."

I stuck out my tongue.

We left the music room for the gardens, and the rest of the day passed without another mention of him. I did not give anyone a message. Seline had nothing to apologize for.

Before dinner, I glanced at the calendar. So few Xs, yet each held so much weight. *He is only a beast, Seline had said. Is it good or bad that she thinks so? I cannot believe she'd be so forgiving of his behavior if he were a man. Yet I cannot imagine her falling in love if she sees him as only a beast.*

I examined the pressure in my chest, the ever-present tension, but there was no change. Madame's Command, I was beginning to suspect, didn't know anything

more than I did. Could it be a reflection of my own perceptions? Thus it was uncertain, since I was uncertain when it came to love? Falling in love was, without question, less straightforward than making someone appear a thief.

I shut the calendar in a drawer.

Seline hid her nerves well as I dressed her for dinner. As the brush lifted from the vanity and began to slide through her locks, she raised an eyebrow. “You don’t know how to arrange hair, do you? I can teach you. Tomorrow afternoon? I used to arrange Estelle’s hair when we were younger, as play.” Her expression clouded. “She probably enjoyed it because I was acting the servant, but it was quite fun.”

“I’m always up for fun,” I said, and I meant it.

“Oh! And don’t forget the new book,” she said once I’d set down the brush.

I fetched it from her bedroom. On the cover, a small ship fled from pirates over a churning sea. She’d told me she could read it with more passion, given her father’s merchant life. Beast would prefer it, she was sure.

Please, please may he come, I thought as I waved the book at her.

We went to dinner and ate separately. Bertram fetched me, and before we continued to collect my lady, he whispered the good news: His Highness would attend tonight.

So behave, I ordered myself. *Better yet, don’t speak. Yes and no. That’s it. You can handle that for a single evening, right?*

Bertram left us in Master’s favorite room. Seline took her chair. I went to my corner. The clock ticked. One minute. Two. Five.

A soft grunt came from the doorway.

Seline bounced to her feet with an enthusiastic grin. “You came!”

Master took a step backward. “You, happy?”

She dipped a quick curtsy. “I am so sorry, Beast. Please forgive my anger the other night. It was nothing you did, just some silly memories that—Really, you did not offend me, and I am so glad you are joining us tonight.”

He blinked, slowly, as if trying to sort through the stream of words she’d gushed at him. “Us?”

“Claudette is here, of course. Or do you want me to send her away?” The last comment didn’t have the inflection of a question, but instead one of dismay.

He frowned at my corner. I didn’t move. “She may stay. Unless impertinent again.”

Silence. Silence, silence, silence.

Seline laughed. “She attacked me with a feather duster the other day.”

He rumbled low in his chest.

“Oh, no. Do not be upset,” Seline said. Her bright smile flashed once more. “It was exactly what I needed. She tickled me out of my melancholy faster than anything. Claudette’s very perceptive.”

He humphed and went to his chair. Seline’s grin faded. She studied him with such a pensive expression that I wanted to knock him upside the head and tell him to smile. Even if it meant showing off his teeth.

I kept my statuesque self in the corner.

“Shall I read again?” Seline asked. She waved to my corner. I brought the book then scurried back to my place. “I brought an adventure story, something you may find more interesting.”

“Not tonight.” He said the words slowly, his body tense. His gaze flickered past her and forward, to my corner, before it centered on her again. “Would rather... converse.”

Her eyes widened, but she quickly veiled her surprise. She set the book on the table, behind the tea set. "Of course. What do you wish to talk about?"

"What you read?"

She almost answered, but a noisy inhale stopped her.

He tried again. "What *do* you... like... to read? Normally."

"Oh." She hesitated, but he didn't add anything else. "Well, all sorts of things. My sister Estelle is the one with taste. She reads classics and adores dramas. Me, well, I prefer romances and adventures." She blushed. "Though I have read my share of the others."

"What is your favorite book?"

"It's difficult to pick one. I love Jocelin-Hélène Mancion's works. She's quite popular. Have you read any of her books?"

"No. I afraid—The libraries are outdated."

He asked about Mancion's titles, which aspects of her books Seline enjoyed the most, and so on. I listened, puzzled. Seline glowed with delight at the clunky conversation. He sounded rehearsed, for some questions did not relate to her answers, and his labored sentences were excruciating. He did everything he could to keep himself to questioning and her to explaining. Yet, they were talking.

He's been practicing with Lord Antoine. The realization took me aback. But the rehearsed questions, the almost-normal way of speaking, the repeating phrases when he forgot a word... He was trying to remember.

Remember how to be human.

Because of me. The regret I had felt for upsetting him faded. Mostly. I nearly praised him, but I recalled Madame's warning just in time. Since she'd given me the calendar, I'd already crossed out three days. Knowing him, he'd find my praise insulting and stay away again.

Thus, silence. Silence, though my foot couldn't help wiggling as my excitement grew. Master still sat like a stone threatening to shatter into a thousand pieces at the slightest touch of a breeze. Maybe he resented having to talk to her. Maybe he feared offending her. I didn't care. For he *did* speak, and she answered, and while the conversation would not charm a scullery maid, the attempt pleased me.

The moment the water clock chimed, Master cleared his throat.

"Goodness, it is late," Seline said. She gathered her skirt, a lovely gold-dusted mauve. "I have enjoyed this evening. Thank you for your company."

He snorted.

"Truly," she said. "I enjoy Claudette, but it is nice to speak to something that I can hear in return."

I frowned. I was a something to her, not a someone. But then so was the former prince.

Seline dipped low in a curtsy. He didn't move.

"Master," I whispered. By rights, I could call him Your Highness, but I didn't think either of us was comfortable with my lady-in-waiting status. "May I humbly suggest you bow?"

'Humbly' may have been unnecessary. But I asked in a demure voice.

His eyes flickered once more my way, and with seeming reluctance, he stood. He held his tattered cloak to the side and touched his waist as he bowed. "Goodnight."

Seline smiled. "Sleep well, Beast."

I practically walked in her footsteps as she moved toward the door. I didn't want him to talk to me. I could feel his stare drilling into my back. *No, he's looking through me at her. He cannot be angry. I said I'd try, and that's exactly what I did. I*

stayed silent for an entire hour!

I was so determined to *not* glance over my shoulder that I didn't notice when Seline stopped walking. I passed right through her, making me shiver.

"Beast?" she said.

Come on, come on. We were two steps from the doorway.

"I was wondering, are there any musicians in the castle?"

Sudden tension stifled the room. Seline radiated peace, but it did not affect me, for my attention was focused on his hand gripping his cloak too tightly.

"Musicians," he repeated.

I reached out to tug her, to tell her no, but I couldn't touch her. My frantic hand waved through her once, twice. Panicking was the opposite of concentrating. Maybe if I got in front of her, where I couldn't see his displeasure, I could manage a small shove?

"You said that if I desired something, the castle could provide it." Her expression became more guarded, and she fiddled with her skirt. "I mean, if it is too much trouble, I do not mind—"

"No," he said. Another pause. Seline's brow furrowed as if she were unsure if he meant no, not trouble, or no, not possible. Gravel scraped against stone as he cleared his throat. "Not difficult. Can wake them. What kind?"

"Oh, I..." Her eyes darted around as if searching. Searching for me. His frown returned with vehemence. She smiled, oblivious, as if she were envisioning a happy, invisible lady-in-waiting. "Piano. Yes, she'd like that."

"Do you not like music?" he said through his teeth.

"I fear I do not have enough talent to tell the skilled from the unskilled, but I do enjoy listening. I believe Claudette, however, greatly enjoys—"

Her words died as she caught his expression. She swallowed. I took a few steps closer to her, making a note of any nearby objects I could use to shield us from debris. Say, that spindly excuse for a table by the door.

"I do not... honor requests. From *servants*." He growled the last word.

I expected her to crumble, to fold into herself, to turn and run. Instead, she squared her shoulders.

"Well, *I* do." Her chin lifted, every bit the commanding princess.

He blinked, then glared at me. "You planned this. You *mock* me."

"No, Master," I said. "Honestly. The other night made me think—" *Ack! No, do not mention that night.* "I mean I—I wondered if she could play, so I took her to the smaller music room in the East Wing."

Seline followed his gaze to the empty space beside her. "I think you are distressing her. There is a breeze."

"I distress *her*?"

Seline flinched at his volume, and he sucked in a great breath.

"Master," I said, "please forgive me. I never dreamed she'd ask." Panic raced through me. They had been doing so well! They'd had their first real evening together, and still I had managed to ruin it.

Of course, if he didn't feel contempt for everyone born beneath him, he wouldn't have lost his temper that night.

"Beast." Seline held out her hands, palms up. "Claudette has done so much for me. It would greatly please me, both because it brings her pleasure and also because, well, it is something to do."

His expression softened, his brows smoothing. "True. There is little of what was."

“What was,” Seline mouthed, though she didn’t voice the words. She smiled and curtsied again. “Thank you, Beast.”

“Give me two days. I see—I will see you again, night after next.”

Seline took her leave, with me at her elbow. He didn’t call after me. Once in the hall, I rubbed the sweat from my brow. Seline’s face stayed serene, but her long legs walked so fast I had to jog to keep up with her. Once in a while, she glanced over her shoulder, as did I.

As I shut her chamber door behind us, Seline collapsed on the sofa in the sitting room.

“I did *not* expect that,” she said. “Beast doesn’t like you, does he?”

I shrugged. She didn’t need to see my body language to know the answer.

She stood and went to the writing desk and grabbed a piece of paper. She folded it thrice, fanned herself, and sank back into the sofa. The redness in her cheeks faded.

“Please don’t think worse of him,” I said, willing her to sense the urging in my voice. *Damn his temper, undoing everything!* “He’s prejudiced. It wasn’t you.”

“May I have some wine?” A wine glass emerged from a side cabinet. “Get yourself a glass, too.”

I poured. We clinked the glasses together. She smiled and said, “Here’s to taming the beast.”

I chuckled without humor as I took the cushion beside her. “Taming? I’m not sure it’s possible.”

Seline took a swig of wine and watched my wine glass tip. “I’m glad you eat and drink. It helps me believe you exist. Oh dear. My glass is shaking.”

I took it from her. As I did, she breathed out a half laugh. “I’m not sure how you put up with him. He’s got a frightful temper.” She shuddered. “I don’t think he’d hurt me, though. All of you treat me like—Anyway. Are you pleased? You’ll get to hear music. I assume that’s why you brought me to the music room. Because you miss it. Not because you wanted to anger him.”

I hadn’t wanted her to bring it up at all, though bless her good intentions. I frowned, wondering if my enchanted body could manage a thank-you. I closed my eyes. *No, I need to see.* I opened my eyes and attempted to wrap my arms around her.

Seline gasped as the ghost arms embraced her. It only lasted a moment. The second I saw her surprise, I lost my concentration and went through her.

“Did you just hug me?” I tugged her skirt. “You did? Then I am sure I did the right thing. But...” She raised a finger and shook it in my direction. “We are trying to be kind to Beast. I think he can be quite the gentleman, once he learns how. I’m not sure what your past is with him, but I do want you two to get along.”

“I will try,” I said. I sighed and looked at the light patterns in the plastered ceiling. Hadn’t I tried tonight? “I am not sure I’ll succeed. He’s rather impossible.”

And I have a temper.

But not as bad as his.

I put her to bed, then lay awake in mine. The disaster tumbled over and over in my mind. *Not disaster. Seline no longer fears him. Much.* His anger did unnerve her, but she had stood up to him. Better yet, she still seemed determined to make the best of the situation. Surely that could lead to love?

I barely breathed for fear of Summons, but none came. I twitched in bed all the same. I got up to peek at Seline’s face, but seeing her brow, smooth with peaceful sleep, didn’t help either. My muscles wouldn’t relax, my stomach wouldn’t unknot. Master had given in too easily. Because of Seline? If he gave in to please her, that

would be a first step. The beast, thinking of someone other than himself. Then I remembered what Seline had said, how waking the musicians would give us something to do.

Perhaps he missed his old life, and Seline had made him remember it.

Good for her. I crawled back into my bed and snuggled the feather comforter. *He'll hear the music, remember how much he loved it, and appreciate Seline all the more for her defiance. Then he'll be pleasant, and pleasant people are much easier to fall in love with.*

CHAPTER 13

A dressing gown did not land on my head and startle me awake, as it had the past few days. Instead, I woke with confusion, for I smelled... chocolate? I sat up, rubbed my eyes, and wondered if I was still dreaming.

A mug—a stout, decent-sized servant’s mug instead of a teacup—steamed on the bedside table. My mouth watered. I had tasted hot chocolate only once before, on a festival day when a wealthy noble had bought some for the entire orphanage, either out of a guilty conscience or genuine benevolence.

“Are you going to drink it? The covers are moving, so I know you’re up.”

Marie. Through my dressing room door, I saw my wardrobe open.

Still dumb with sleep, I stared at the mug. “Did you bring this? For me?”

Invisible hands pulled out a skirt, paused, then put it back. “Yes.”

Peace offering, then. She was ready to forgive me for being me. I raised the mug in the air. “Thank you.” I brought the rim to my lips, then paused. “Do you want half?”

A tense giggle. “I already stole some.”

“*Ma-rie!*” I said in mock disapproval.

“It’s not my fault. Hugh snuck me a cup.”

A bonus to having a kitchen boy as a beau. “In that case, I’m not sharing.”

She bustled around the dressing room as I sipped frothy, chocolatey heaven. Finally, her voice called. “Are you going to stay in bed all morning?”

“I wish.” Yet, as I said the words, I realized I didn’t feel that way at all. Seline had promised to teach me how to arrange her hair, and that could be quite fun. Tomorrow night, I’d hear the piano. Not even the threat of *him* could dull my excitement to hear music again. I found myself bounding out of bed.

A scarlet dress floated over to me.

I raised an eyebrow. “Yesterday I wore mourning colors, and today I’m a hussy?”

“Might as well try new things.” The dress fluttered. “Besides, you can pull this color off.”

“Poor Robert.”

She burst out laughing. “He’ll bring you flowers again if you wear this when we’re visible.”

“Joy of joys.” I slipped the dress on and, after a few attempts, found her hands so I could guide them to my back. Fingers fluttered until they found the fasteners.

“I wanted to say, I am sorry,” she said as she laced the dress over the corset.

“Marie, you don’t need—”

“Rather, I am half sorry.” An exhale of breath. Marie used to blow her bangs off of her forehead while puzzling over awkward explanations. “I am not sorry for cautioning you about Master’s wrath. You should still keep your opinions to

yourself.”

I frowned. “Isn’t that why we fought?”

“It is, but...” She turned my shoulders so I’d face her, even if I couldn’t see her. “For the past few days, it’s been more than that. I heard about the piano, and I assumed it was your fault. Well, everyone said it was your fault, so can you blame me? I was furious. I—I don’t want them to dismiss you, once this all goes away.”

“Ah.” I shifted my weight off of my short leg. “Please don’t worry—”

“I do, and you can’t stop me. It’s my job. That’s what we friends do. We watch out for each other.”

I wished I could see her face. When the gaze of two people meet, it’s as if two souls touch. The purest communication, the mingling of two hearts. With invisibility, I didn’t have any way to express what her words meant to me.

I reverted to pathetic joking. “Watch out for each other, eh? Then I need to know Hugh’s lineage, every detail of his childhood. Fortunately he did fall in love with *you*, which shows he’s not only sensible but has great taste.”

She laughed. “Why do you always make light when I’m being serious? I’m trying to tell you I was wrong. I should not have accused you when you did nothing.”

Guilt. Why did I always feel guilt? I swallowed and prepared to make her disappointed in me all over again. “Marie, it *was* my fault. I infuriated Master. I made him so angry that he poofed me clear across the castle.”

“He can do that?”

“Forcefully.”

“Oh, Claudette.” A sigh, and an indent in the nearby chair’s cushion. “You are never going to learn.”

“Likely not.” I expected her to be more upset. “Why did you decide me innocent? What did you hear?”

“This morning, when I saw Hugh. He’d overheard Cook talking to the apothecary. The apothecary said Master lost his temper after trying to play the piano.”

Dumb of him to try, with his massive hands. “So he didn’t smash it after poofing me?”

“Apparently not. He’s broken it before.”

I thought back. In those early days, a clumsy and angry Master had broken lots of furniture. But there had been a day when I’d needed help cleaning up the Harmony Room. Madame had set a few to start on it before me, though, and by the time I’d arrived, the piano was whole. Everything else was in shambles, which was annoying, but the piano was fine. So I’d taken it as one of his regular fits.

Marie continued. “Back then, Master went into such a frenzy that the apothecary had to drug him to calm him, and then he drugged him again after Master slipped into melancholy. I remember it. The uppers were in a complete snit. Madame scolded Louise who took it out on Blanche, and you know how she is, and —”

“So his tantrum then—and now—is because he couldn’t play,” I said. Could it truly have not been my fault? I hadn’t helped Master’s mood. He had banished me, after all. “Madame told me—at least, she certainly made it sound like he smashed the piano in a fit of rage at me.”

Marie picked up my nightdress and tossed it into the launderer’s basket. “She apparently told someone else the same, because *everyone* thinks it’s your fault. But Hugh is positive he overheard the apothecary right. Master broke the piano some time after you left, in despair because he can no longer play.”

Anger boiled upward in my throat. Despite the small room, I started to pace. The evening became clear in my mind. Madame had been upset when I'd arrived because Master had thrown an epic fit. And she may have truly blamed me, for he and I *had* fought, and I'd accused him of acting like a beast, and I could imagine him now, after poofing me, trying to recapture the music he'd loved as a human.

But it *wasn't* my fault in the end. I hadn't taunted him about the piano. He didn't need it to be civil toward Seline. Yet Madame, with me already there for the calendar, had seen an opportunity, a way to force the snippy servant to behave. She knew I loved music; no doubt someone had heard my tentative plunking. Madame knew everything. It was only a small step to smudge the truth and tell me I'd caused the destruction.

Fine. I did need caution. But to spread lies?

"She used me," I growled.

Marie had resumed cleaning, and her feather duster paused over a table. "Claudette..."

"I know. I'm not dumb. I expect her to use me. But to let everyone believe—Why would she? I don't have a stellar reputation, but at least it's based on truth!"

"Claudette, you need to calm down." The duster clattered to the table. My mug lifted; it was empty, and I could *see* her faltering. "Gossip blows over."

It was so much more than gossip. If Seline failed, Madame could pin it on me. Not Lady Marguerite's fault, oh no. Not even the prince's. *Mine*.

I took a deep breath. Now I could try to tell Marie. She was listening. "Madame —"

My throat closed.

"Madame?" Marie said again.

"Seline—Her coming—"

That was all. I couldn't form a sentence. I tried to say *I'm not allowed to talk about it*, but I couldn't even manage that.

"You're scaring me," Marie said. "It sounds like you're gagging."

"Marie. There is much more than you realize. I'm not just a lady-in-waiting. I—I—well buckets of piss!" I ran a hand through my hair, thinking. At the least I could let Marie know just how unreasonably Madame had behaved, if not telling her details. "Your first master. You hated him because he used you."

I heard the stillness. I'd guessed, long ago, but we never discussed it.

"It's not that bad," I hurried to say. "Nothing like that, with a man, but I've done —"

The magic cut me off, but Marie had enough to guess. "You've done things you're not proud of. The curse has something to do with it."

"Madame," I said. Sibyla did cast the muck-swilling curse, but Madame used the rules to exploit us.

"Please quit trying to tell me. You sound awful." The empty mug floated to a tray, and I heard her fingernail tap the pottery. "Whatever you do, don't go to war with Madame."

I wasn't going to simper and allow her to spread lies.

"I mean it," Marie said at my silence. "Madame's too high. She has the Command, and she can Command others against you. But I hear what you're saying, that she's forcing you to act in ways you don't agree with. All of us noticed you were right behind Seline when she showed up instead of Reynaud."

"I'm a person, not a tool," I said.

The tray lifted. "You were hired to be a tool, not a person."

Her voice wavered as she said it, though. She was surely thinking of her former master.

"I was hired to scrub floors," I said, jaw tight. "Then I agreed to clean parlors. I never agreed to be a lady-in-waiting." I sighed, shook my head, and opened the door for the floating tray. "Don't worry about me, Marie."

"It's when you tell me not to worry that I worry the most."

There was nothing I could say to that.

Marie went on to her next assignment, while I accepted a waiting breakfast tray and woke Seline. I only half listened to her plans for the day: a walk in the gardens, reading in the afternoon, playing with her hair in the evening. My skin itched, but it wasn't because of my dress. *No one matters to Madame when it comes to her goals. Not me. Not Reynaud and Seline. Not even, I believe, our prince.*

The longer I dwelt on it, the more furious I became. After several tries at communicating, I persuaded Seline to go to the library before the gardens. I trusted her now. The moment she settled with a book, I slipped away.

I couldn't Summon the Lady of the Keys. When I concentrated, however, I felt a sort of tightness in the air, down and to my right. I followed the sensation downstairs to the sub-floor, to where servants and supplies were housed. To the world that was already becoming a memory.

Smoky oil lamps lit the halls here and there, providing just enough light to see in pitch blackness. Exactly the same number of lamps burned now as before, despite the endlessly renewing supplies.

At this time of day, the servants were all elsewhere. I Sensed no one as I passed through the dim hallways, until I came to a rectangle of light.

The Crystal Room. Peering through the open door, I saw a squarish sort of room lined with cabinets. Each displayed crystal bowls, vases, and dishes. All were locked. On the central table, shards of broken glass reformed into a spherical shape. Candles, dozens of them, lit the room so that the crystals threw rainbows on every surface.

Madame's voice counted steadily over the *chinks* of mending glass. Beside her voice floated an open book, and a feather quill twitched with each count.

I Sensed. The Keeper of the Crystal, I suspected, though I couldn't remember his name, nor did I know the servant mending the glass.

The counting ended. "Are we in agreement?" The Keeper replied yes, he had counted thirty-two, as well. Madame raised her voice. "Lady Claudette? Is there something the matter with Seline?"

I jerked, flustered. I thought I'd been quiet, so she shouldn't have known I stood there, and I didn't know that anyone had the ability to Sense while doing something like counting. I cleared my throat. "No, Madame, but I need to speak with you."

"Go on."

"In private."

"Ah." Silence, for Madame didn't need words. At the simple *ah* the Keeper's book snapped shut. At the table, a shard of glass lowered. Both left the room, and Madame didn't speak until the door closed. "What is it, then? It is inventory day, and while few items are missing or broken, it is still tedious work."

You've never dusted unused rooms. I bit back the retort. Marie was partially right. I ought not make an enemy of Madame. "You told me I made Master lose his temper. That he wrecked the piano because of me."

Keys appeared and locked each cabinet. "And?"

"And? And you li—" *Lied* was a strong word. "I, well, I heard that he smashed the piano after he attempted to play, not after speaking to me." The keys paused.

Calm. Not accusing. “I feel... misled.”

The keys resumed with a snort. “You were the one to initially upset him. He once found music soothing. If not for your aggressive behavior, he would never have tried something so foolish.”

“I didn’t taunt him into—”

“You. Upset. Him.” The last lock turned. “I stand by what I told you. Every time you incite his displeasure, you jeopardize our future.”

Trying to stay calm was making my chin ache. “You used *his* tantrum to make *me* do what you wanted. And you told the castle the same so I’d believe it all the more—”

“And it worked,” Madame said, smoother than silk. “Think of it as a service you performed to protect your master’s reputation.”

“My master’s—” I barely kept myself from swearing. “If you’re worried about his reputation, you should reprimand him about *his* behavior, not mine.”

“That is not how it works. He is a prince. You are a guttersnipe.”

“And *you* are a manipulative witch.”

Silence. Not even the jangle of keys, she’d gone so still.

Marie would sputter apologies at this point. She’d grovel, she’d offer herself up for floor drudgery. Marie never would have made such a slip in the first place.

I stood straighter.

Madame finally spoke. “You mistake competence and authority for manipulation. A dreck has no sense of respect or gratitude.”

“I’m supposed to be grateful for what you’ve made me do?” She started to reply, something about giving me my new station, but my indignation burned so hot I couldn’t hear. “I’m supposed to respect what you’ve done to Seline and her family?”

Madame sighed. “When the curse breaks—”

“*If* it breaks. And if it doesn’t, you’ll pin the blame on me.”

“If it doesn’t break, I will be right to do so.” The keys shook at me. “I was wrong to make you so high. You have been nothing but impudence and trouble. I revoke my Commands. All of them, except the one for silence toward the other servants.”

My skin tingled, and the ever-present pressure evaporated like water on a mopped floor.

I’d always thought I’d rejoice when the Commands ended. Had I not searched for a way to be released? Now that it had happened...

Loss.

I *liked* being Seline’s lady-in-waiting.

“I cannot believe I ever called you clever,” Madame said, as brisk footsteps took her to the door. The handle flipped, and it swung open. “Well? You’ve been demoted. Go report to your upper.”

I took a step. Two. I would not cry. Had I expected anything else, in challenging Madame? Maybe lowborn Claudette was a simpleton after all.

A hot tear tickled my cheek. I wiped it before it fell and became visible. “You’ll pay, someday.”

“Excuse me?” Madame’s foot tapped. “I daresay I heard menace in your mutterings.”

I halted. We stood so close, I smelled the tea and cod liver oil on her breath. I didn’t back down, nor did I whisper. “You forget about after.”

A humph. “If you dally any longer—”

“Seline *will* end the curse.” My anger began to prickle into hot triumph. Into faith in Seline. “Then what will you do? Seline will be *queen*, and you will not have magic to bully others. She’s not like our spoiled prince who ignores the needs of others. She’s considerate, compassionate. How will she react when she hears how you brought her here?”

“You dare not,” Madame said. She’d clearly thought such a possibility through, and there was no doubt in her voice. “Anything you tell her will incriminate you. No magic forced Reynaud’s return. Nor were you compelled to bring her here.”

Damn. I had noticed a lack of Command, back when Madame told me to bring her a daughter. She was right. Choosing Seline specifically was entirely my action.

“Yes,” she said. Like a dog, she sensed my fear. “You dare not speak a word against me. That is why I am Lady of the Keys, and you are one of the dozens who can dust a room. *I* understand duty. *I* do what is necessary. Always.”

Never had I heard such certainty in anyone’s voice. Yet, I couldn’t agree. To be so callous, so calculating. “You and Sibyla are the same.”

She inhaled. “You had better go before I forget the few times you did further our cause. Go, before I forget to show mercy and demote you to ash girl.”

I went. There was nothing else I could do.

CHAPTER 14

*S*he upper maid greeted me with scandalized glee. She set me to beating rugs, and snickered as she did so.

Without people to dirty them, the rugs hardly needed attention, but I welcomed the work. The servants forced to bring me the rugs from their rooms made all sorts of snide comments, but insults didn't hurt. Not when I had rugs to attack. In a haze of dusty frustration I beat them, each swing at Madame and Sibyla and myself. Late evening, I collapsed into bed and stayed oblivious until—

Super early morning. My bedmate bounced up. The motion startled me, and my body screamed at the jerk of surprise. With hisses of pain I followed the sound of mutterings and yawns down the ill-lit hall. *You can do this, Claudette. You did this before. Just a few days and all this will seem normal again.*

Pain distracted me while I cleaned my first rooms. I welcomed it. Each ache meant I wouldn't think. But my body hadn't been a lady for very long, and the screaming muscles soon limbered. By servants' breakfast, reality said a sharp hello.

No one sat by me. A floating ladle plopped cold, slimy porridge into my bowl. I gulped it down, trying to forget the taste of butter as it melted into a hot breakfast. My old clothes chafed at the seams, and my skin was sticky with yesterday's sweat. The room smelled of unwashed bodies and food. Despite myself, I daydreamed of Seline's perfume, orange blossoms and spice.

"Marie's the Lady's companion now," someone whispered, much too loud.

I stiffened.

Someone else snorted. "At least that choice makes sense."

"Why train up a gimpy foundling, anyway?"

"Did anyone take Marie's place?"

"I bet she's enjoying a hot bath right now."

The gossip ceased when keys entered the room. Madame clapped, twice. As one we grabbed our bowls, mine only half eaten, and lined up to drop them in a bin as we returned to work.

I need to warn Marie, I thought as I followed others down cramped hallways and narrow stairs. She'd try to come to me, but it was hopeless. Madame would watch her. Madame watched *me*, for whenever I Sensed, the same presence trailed after me. It was a small presence, one I didn't know, likely an ash girl or a page. I suspected Madame might set someone to haunt the nobles' halls outside my rooms, too.

Perhaps it doesn't matter. Madame likely Commanded Marie as she had me. There's little to warn her of.

There was nothing that I could do. Nothing but clean.

Gray dust coated every object in my rooms. Madame hadn't given anyone extra duties, nor had she woken anyone to take my place. The dust did give me a small

amount of glee whenever the gray turned to shine, yet it also confirmed what I'd long suspected.

Even before the curse, I had been as good as invisible.



I came to the Harmony Room. The servants' door had been jammed, somehow, and I had to go through the nobles' hall. As I entered, I did my best not to look at the large mahogany grand as I pulled the curtains.

This is where it all began.

The thought struck me like a slap. I'd been standing, just like this, at the window. My duster tucked under my elbow, just like now, with my hand gripping the thick cloth of the drape. On that day, though, movement on the grounds below had caught my eye. A horse.

"A man!" I'd gasped.

A *visible* man. The horse wanted nothing to do with the castle, for the man had dismounted and dragged her by the reins. Droplets glistened in the horse's mane, and damp darkened the man's hat and cloak. That should have warned me—wet on a clear day—but I hadn't noticed.

"He's beautiful," I said. I drank in the jerkiness of his movements as his hat fell. Sunshine glinted off his bald head. Nine years since I'd *seen* a person. I wanted to giggle, to dance, to warn him. A visible person meant we might soon be free, and yet...

On the lawn, the horse's reins wrestled themselves from the man's grasp; a groomsman had noticed the visitor. The man's eyes widened as the reins tugged the mare to the stables. The horse stopped struggling and trotted after her invisible guide. Master never went to the stables, and surely the horse could smell Master's scent on the paths near the castle. It amazed me that the man did not run away when the reins took on a life of their own.

He sneezed three times. *He's sick, then. Needs help.* He drew closer and then disappeared from my sight.

I knew my station. During our visible days, I was to stay out of sight. Invisibility took care of that, but I still had no business leaving my post. Even if his arrival was the only change to happen in years...

I promised myself I'd work extra hard later as I hurried to catch a peek at the stranger.

"That was your mistake," I said to myself now. My foolish curiosity, my impulsiveness.

Outside, near the lilac, a smudge of pink flashed. Seline, in the garden because I'd brought her here, because I'd made Reynaud take the rose, because Beast and Madame had noticed me in the hallway...

Because I'd left my post.

So do your damn duty and stay out of trouble this time.

I turned, lifted my duster, and faltered again.

Not a speck of gray dulled the gleaming piano. The air smelled of sunshine and lilac; the room had already been aired. A sofa for two had been angled to perfectly view the keys. A large, wing-backed chair sat separated from the sofa by a tea table. All the other seats had been dragged to the sides of the room.

Beast ordered it prepared for tonight's performance.

I swallowed, hard. When had I started to think of him as Beast? Seline always called him Beast. But he wasn't. He was Master. Always... A spark of my old self flared.

He's a fitful toddler.

I squeezed my eyes shut, yelling at myself to be a servant. When I opened them, it didn't help. I could imagine Seline there, on the sofa tonight, her brilliant smile upon Marie, who didn't care for music. And Marie, each time Seline smiled at her, would scuff her feet on the floor, guilt and nerves plaguing her as she pretended to be me. And I'd be in the Morning Room. I'd hear nothing but the ghost of music.

Don't think. Don't feel. The room blurred.

It started as tiny snuffles, seeping tears. I pulled back the piano's bench and rested my duster beside me as I sat. I lifted the wood that protected the keys and pressed a single note. I didn't even know its name. Low. Mournful. I burst into tears and flung myself on the piano, which protested with an ugly *bonnnnnng*.

When I cry, I do so with great gulps and whining and sniffing. I didn't notice him coming into the room. I didn't see him standing there for goodness knew how long. I didn't smell cinnamon and musk, for my nose had stuffed up.

"You get the piano wet," came a low rumble.

I shoved myself upright, snorting and gurgling as my tears halted. I quickly wiped the piano with my apron and spun around on the bench.

"I—I—"

"Why are you here?" His eyes scanned the room. "Seline?"

"She is—Madame—" I took a steadying, wet breath. My cheeks prickled with heat. I fumbled for what strength I could and pulled it into a protective blanket around me. "I fear the Lady of the Keys does not tolerate impertinence as well as you do. I am back to being a parlormaid."

He grunted, but I couldn't read his inhuman face. His gaze focused on the feather duster on the bench. "You mock me, and Lady Marguerite does nothing. You mock her..."

"Double standards do not bother her."

His features tightened, and a spark of glee ignited in my belly, because his anger, for once, was not at me. He shook himself. "You cry because you are not a lady?"

I blinked, surprised he'd ask such a thing. "No. I don't love being a parlormaid, but it's not bad. I'll get used to it again. Except..." My throat constricted. Why was I even trying to explain? He didn't care, not really. But he waited, listening. "I like Seline. I like helping her. I miss her. Already."

The clothing and food and baths... They were nice, but those memories would fade. I supposed memories of Seline would fade, too. Not soon. Not soon at all.

I twisted and lowered the cover over the keys. "I regret I will not be here, tonight."

"You did plan," he said.

"No." My shield began to crumble. "No. I had hoped Seline could play. I wanted to hear, but she cannot. She asked you about musicians for me, but I never meant for her to—"

I did not know if he believed me. He stood there, a breathing, warm gargoyle.

"Forgive me," I said. I grabbed the duster in both hands. "I should have left the moment you came into the room."

He already lurked in the doorway, and had I not been watching, I wouldn't have noticed how he subtly shifted so I could not pass. I couldn't walk through him, like I did Seline. He was as much of the castle as a wall. When I came to him, he didn't

step to the side but instead stared at me as best he could without being able to see.

My temper tried to return. It fizzled, exhausted. "I am annoying you again, somehow. Please, once you let me pass, you'll never need to bother with me again. You'll like Marie. She is polite and obedient. The perfect servant."

He stepped to the side and his cloak—a rich, deep wine—fluttered.

"Your new clothes look nice," I said.

"I am honored by your approval." Gravelly sarcasm.

I grinned for the first time that day. I bobbed instead of curtsied, muttered, "Master," and squeezed past him.

The grin lightened my mood for a bit, but not long. As I continued my duties, my thoughts kept returning to him. Why had he stood there like a statue? I couldn't understand his actions at all. He should have grinned with joy at the prospect of an evening without my pert comments. My pride could have bristled at his pleasure. Instead, I felt confused.

It doesn't matter what Bea—Master thinks or feels, I told myself. You never belonged in that world.

As for Seline, once she became a princess, she'd have so many people in her life that she'd forget the servant she'd known for so short a time. Noblewomen changed servants all the time, I heard. The uppers who waited on them always cautioned against becoming friends. It only led to betrayal and heartache.



B I'd made myself if not cheerful, resolved. Seline would break the curse. I'd leave the castle. Find something else. A little old lady, perhaps, with enough age that she didn't care about my leg and enough poverty to not be picky. The perfect situation.

Perfect enough that I did *not* see the Morning Room's clock hands point to 8:01. Or 8:03. Not even 8:06 or—

Summons.

Impatient Summons, like a child jerking a toy on a string. I bit back a squeal, straightened my apron, and dropped the duster on the floor as I sprinted out of the room.

The Harmony Room was alive with agitated silence. Beast stood by his chair, his body swaying as if he'd rather pace. Seline sat, arms folded and frowning. I Sensed Marie beside her and the pianist at the bench. No one else.

"Bea—Master," I said with the servants' bob. Good. Not quite out of breath.

He didn't answer, because the moment his attention turned to the door, Seline said, "Is that her? Is she here?"

"She is here," Beast said. He did not sound nearly as elated as Seline, but I could live with that. "Claudette, you are Lady Seline's lady-in-waiting once more."

The Command clamped on me, and this time I grinned.

Seline rushed to the doorway. "Pick up something so I know where you are!" I grabbed a vase etched with silver herons. She beamed at the area above it, only slightly to the right of my eyes. "I noticed you missing yesterday, and I've been asking for you, but nothing's happened! Come, sit. The pianist is here. Oh, Beast, may Marie stay as well? It would be cruel to send her away now."

"I will Summon a footman for another chair."

Seline's happiness made the room glow. She grabbed my vase—the best she could do without seeing a hand—and dragged me to the sofa. "Beast told me that

Lady of the Something had taken you away from me,” she said in a low voice as Beast spoke to Bertram about the chair. “You must have a wicked tongue. I told him I was not upset with you in the slightest, and I wanted—nay, I *demand*—you back. No offense to Marie, of course, but *you* are my companion. Beast Summoned you immediately.”

I wanted to hug her. There was no way I could manage the concentration, so I patted her arm instead. Vigorously. I glanced at Beast—he was busy directing the chair—so I leaned over to whisper an apology to Marie.

“No,” she said, “I am relieved. The lace itches.” It was her way of saying our friendship was preserved.

“When did Seline know?” I asked.

“Immediately, I think.” My heart soared with pleasure. “She knew for certain after dinner last night. I am... unteachable, I fear.”

Of course. A smile grew and grew on my face. Seline had wanted to teach me how to arrange hair, but Marie had waited on lowborn ladies before, which was obvious from Seline’s hair: piled upon her head in artful ringlets. Even if Madame had ordered Marie to fool Seline, it would have been difficult to both feign inexperience and be me. Marie was the opposite of carefree and playful when she was worried.

Bertram finished placing the chair, and we all took our seats. Beast held up a paw. We of the castle heard the pianist clear his throat, and the music began.

For nine years we had lived in relative silence. It made the music all the sweeter. I do not know who Beast woke—I didn’t know the names of the court musicians—but even I, ignorant and unrefined, could tell he was gifted. The ivory keys lowered and sound poured into the air like water flowing in a stream. I breathed out a sigh, entranced as the keys fluttered. The invisibility of the musician made the music more haunting, more powerful. There was no sweat on the musician’s brow, nor his elbow to block the view. Better yet, there were no nobles to whisper as they failed to realize the privilege of a concert. My eyes filled with tears and I struggled to keep from crying. Seline wouldn’t hear, but everyone else would, and I’d ruin the moment with my awkward sniffles.

I’m not sure how many songs the pianist played. One made me sit straight, ready to march for a cause greater than myself. Another filled me with sadness and loss. Next, a playful, cheeky tune; I laughed aloud at that one. Though I cut the outburst short, for Beast’s attention flickered from the piano to me. Thankfully he didn’t growl.

The curse could end us all right now, and I will be happy. As I watched the keys tremble, I imagined young, strong hands, and a blurred man dressed in golden brocade and purple. How well had our prince played before the fairy robbed him of his hands?

The music drifted to an end, the pianist holding the final key until the sound faded. A long pause.

Beast stirred. His eyes glinted in the low candlelight. How embarrassing, to know I cried louder than a beast. He licked his lips, his brows furrowed, and finally he spoke in his slow way. “Does my lady need rest?”

“That was beautiful,” Seline whispered. She looked at the cushion beside her, indented with my weight. “Did you enjoy it? Beast, ask her, did she enjoy the music?”

He snorted. “She sniffed and gasped and giggled during the performance.”

My face warmed.

“Wonderful,” Seline said. “And you? Did you enjoy it, Beast?”

"I... I did."

"Then I am pleased. We shall have to repeat it in the future."

I caught the sparkle leaving her eyes as she said the word 'future,' but she masked her loss with another smile.

"If you wish," Beast said. He nodded, dismissing the pianist.

The faintest line appeared on Seline's forehead. "It is always what I wish, isn't it? Why not Claudette? Why not Beast? I am flattered that everyone wants me happy..." She faltered, and her hands folded as they did when she was uncomfortable.

Beast shifted his weight. I wondered if he shared my worry, that from her point of view, we may be entertaining her only to keep her from dwelling on the fact that we held her prisoner. It was too close to the truth.

He cleared his throat. "There is little I am interested in. Or can do."

"Can you play cards?"

He lifted his giant, awkward hands. Four long, padded fingers with claws, and one bird-like talon for a thumb.

Seline pursed her lips. "You could manage dice. Do you like games?"

Beast shrugged. My old spirit surged inside me, wanting to yell at him to name an activity he enjoyed. Or didn't enjoy. Anything.

"Well, think on it," Seline said. How did she manage to sound so patient and encouraging? "You should choose the entertainment next time."

"Very well." He stood and bowed, not needing a reminder this time to be a gentleman.

Instead of curtsying in return, Seline held up a hand. "Forgive me, but I do have a request. In the future, if there is to be a change in my attendants, I prefer to be asked first."

His lips curled ever so slightly around his fangs, as if he wanted to smile. "The Lady of the Keys manages the household. If you wait, I will Summon her."

Marie inhaled sharply beside me, and she scurried behind Seline and me.

I waited with excitement.

Beast didn't say anything to Summon her. The ridges that resembled eyebrows lowered, and his eyes unfocused. After a moment he straightened to his full height, a head and a half taller than Seline. To her credit, she didn't cringe, though she did pull her head back ever so slightly. Beast's expression formed into a glare, which he turned on the closed door.

It opened. The sound of jangling keys entered, then a sudden clatter as if the keys had smacked into a wall. Madame's voice came, cautious. "Your Highness?"

"Lady Marguerite," Beast said, and his voice trembled in displeasure. "You were mistaken. Cla—" He cleared his throat. "*Lady* Claudette did not offend her mistress. Lady Seline asked for her to be restored."

"Oh, I—well, surely—perhaps instead..." Madame fell silent. She couldn't protest with so many witnesses. My opinion of Beast improved. Even Seline would know if Madame argued, based on what she could hear from him.

"I agreed," Beast said. "I suggest you take care. Lady Seline wishes to be notified before you change her servants."

"You Commanded Claudette to serve as lady-in-waiting?" Madame said. She sounded as if she'd licked furniture polish.

"I did."

Since he Commanded me, only he can un-Command me. It seemed I should thank Madame for my temporary dismissal.

“Very well, Your Highness. I will notify the others that Claudette’s Commands have been reinstated.”

Like a shock of cold water, her previous Command regarding Seline’s romance came over me. My teeth clacked. Beast twitched in my direction, but if he understood what Madame had done, he gave no sign.

That conniving witch. Adding a single *s* to that simple word ‘Command,’ that made all the difference. That, and her will behind it. She’d regained control over me, all while appearing to serve her prince.

“Marie,” Madame said, “you will return to being the chambermaid.”

“Good,” Beast said. He hadn’t noticed. He couldn’t have noticed; he sounded too pleased. He lifted a hand as if to dismiss her, but then the corners of his mouth twitched again. Not a smile. Smugness. His words came out slow but correct and triumphant. “If there are to be changes to Lady Seline’s routine that she does not request, come to me first. She cannot hear you. I do not wish to anger her.”

There was no missing the Command in *that*. I relished the way it made Madame hiss through her teeth.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Beast waved her away as if shooing a fly. The keys jingled again, and the door opened and shut. His expression softened, and he turned to Seline. “It is done.”

“Thank you,” my lady said. She had been following the half of the conversation she could hear. “I will see you tomorrow?”

“Perhaps.” He glanced to her side. To me. “Lady Claudette, one moment. Marie, assist Lady Seline.”

The two left the room, leaving me alone with him.

“I did this for her,” Beast said. “She was distressed.”

“Thank you for thinking of her.” I hoped he interpreted my words as I meant them: with sincere gratitude.

“I still do not like you.”

That made me laugh. His jaw tightened. “You’re not supposed to, Bea—Master. Though I like *you* more, after tonight.”

“Because you are a lady?”

“Because you were kind to Seline,” I said, then paused. “And you were a prince to Lady Marguerite.”

“Get out,” he said. Under the annoyance, he still sounded smug.

I practically skipped out of the Harmony Room. As I returned to the East Wing, I imagined Madame sending me scathing glances. I hoped she imagined me sending her a smirk.

CHAPTER 15

Rarely does a person want a stranger for a son or daughter. I remembered as a little girl running with the other orphans to meet the few people who wanted to adopt. They never took the boy with the mangled upper lip. They never took the cross-eyed girl. They never took me. Eventually, the three of us stopped running. It didn't mean we didn't stop hoping, however. We just learned to hide the hurt of rejection.

Beast infuriated me. After such a pleasant evening—after Seline *asking* if we'd soon see him again—he returned to his pattern of visiting every three nights. No more. No less. He spoke like a normal human being now, and he was always civil and polite. Yet he stayed away, and he treated the evenings with Seline as a duty, not a pleasure.

Worse, Seline didn't seem to mind. While I fumed, she took it as natural for a beast. He was lonely, but he had been alone a long time, and, after all, he wasn't a man. I tried telling the Command that she didn't fear him anymore, but the calendar lurked in my heart, and so the Command's pressure stayed.

A week of crossed-out days. Then more. Seline couldn't fall in love if he saw her so little, especially when he acted like nothing more than a refined *beast*.

"Claudette, dear," Seline said. We stood in the drawing room we met in at night, except now the afternoon sun made warm rectangles on the dark blue carpets. Light made it a much friendlier room. That and the flowers. We'd dragged the tea table to the fireplace and piled stems of flowers on it, destined for the pillars that framed the fireplace. "If you keep jamming the flowers in like that, we'll run out."

I removed the carnation I'd stuck in the vase. Half its stem hung on by a fiber. It swung *to and fro, to and fro*, dripping water. With a sigh, I tossed it on a pile of other mangled flowers on the floor.

Seline selected a foxglove, considered, then slid it into the bouquet we were working on. We'd finished the other pillar's. Next, we'd start a small one for the tea table. All to make the room cheerier for Beast. Who'd said *nothing* when we'd done the same three days earlier.

"One more foxglove, I think," Seline said. Her slender fingers paused on the stem. "What has you so irritable? Is there something you can wave to give me a hint?"

I scowled. "No, because I can't wave around apathy. Nor love." I supposed I could kick his chair. I went over, did so, and swore. The damn thing was *heavy*.

The chair had twitched, however, and Seline's mouth quirked. "That's your own fault. If you'd quit poking at him so, you might stop frustrating each other."

"I can't help it! I have to do *something* for this stupid Command." Which was partially true. If I were honest with myself, I *liked* teasing him. My little comments often made his eyes narrow with annoyance or widen with shock, and, on the rare

occasion, his mouth twitched as if he fought a smile. I liked that the best. I yelled at myself every time I opened my mouth, but a person with visible reactions was too tempting.

No wonder he doesn't come more often.

I stooped over the mangled flowers on the floor. Maybe some were salvageable for the tea table's bouquet.

Seline watched the twitching pile, a thoughtful crease on her brow. "Are you lonely?"

"Huh?" I paused.

"That's the wrong question," she said with a shake of her head. "You're always with me, so you are not alone, just as I am not. And yet, I miss my Pappa. I've come to think of you as a sister, but that does not make me miss him less."

I flushed. She thought of me as a sister? I shifted the stems to one hand so I could rub my eye.

"So what I'm asking is, are you missing someone?" She knelt by the pile of flowers, foxglove on her skirt. "You spend every second with me, and you never have time for yourself. I bet you have a beau somewhere. Beast's valet, maybe, who resents me." She smiled. "Take the afternoons off, an hour or two. I can manage. Send Marie, if you must. I'll tell you when to go, and you can return to dress me for dinner."

No one had ever been so thoughtful toward me before. I rubbed my eyes again. "That's so sweet, but there's no one. I can't visit the other servants while they work." They already resented me enough. No need to flaunt that I had leisure time.

To answer her, I gently tugged the foxglove from her fingers, stood, and slid it into the pillar vase.

She sighed and held on to the next flower I chose: something yellow that I didn't recognize. "I'm being perfectly sincere."

"I've always been alone while I clean." I deftly slipped the stem upward and snaked around her hand to the vase.

A ghost of a smile. "You are so stubborn! If you get out, maybe this evening with Beast will go smoother for you."

"Doubtful."

Seline pressed her hand on the pile of undamaged flowers so I couldn't take another. "Claudette, as your lady, and more so as your friend, I order you to take the afternoons for yourself."

She smiled so encouragingly, her eyes sparkling. She had no idea what the phrase *I order you* did in the castle. Otherwise, she surely would have chosen other words.

It became rather uncomfortable to stand beside her.

Anger flared in my belly. Not at Seline, kindhearted and smiling Seline, but at Sibyla for making such rules. It took all the restraint I had to *gently* pick up a broken flower and leave the room.

I hurled it the moment I rounded the corner into the hallway. The crooked thing didn't sail through the air any satisfying distance, but flopped to the floor in front of me.

"Now what?"

The flower—a daisy, in fact—lay there, forlorn.

I knew the West Wing best, but *he* haunted the West Wing at this time of day. Not to mention it was pathetic to keep to my old parlors and rooms. The kitchen's bustle would make me feel lazy, and I'd overheat in my full lady's dress. Elsewhere, the rooms were either boring or filled with working servants. Plus there was also the

threat of running into Madame.

All that's left is outside. I picked up the poor daisy. The least I could do for it was to let it wilt under the sky.

Fluffy clouds blocked the sun often enough to keep the air cool on my cheeks and arms. I followed dappled paths without purpose. Gravel crunched under each step, the sound grinding up my spine. Why, *why* did Seline have to be so nice? I had absolutely nothing to do. Wandering did little for the Command; I didn't know what I *could* do for the Command.

I halted. Without realizing, I'd come to the Rose Garden.

I hadn't entered it since Reynaud. Seline and I had drawn near it on our walks, but whenever she spied one of the two rose-dripping archways, she went another way. Now I stood close enough to catch the scent of rose on the breeze.

Does the statue still hold a single flower? Silly thought. Of course she did. Another one wouldn't bloom, surely. And yet... *something* must have changed. I gripped the daisy, its stem damp and sticky from being clutched so long, and passed under the archway.

The garden bloomed as before. Climbing roses covered the high walls, bushes sagged with blooms, and petals carpeted the ground. A stream cut through the garden; I hadn't noticed it with Reynaud, but it trickled under a wall and pooled near the statue before flowing the opposite way. The water added a fresh undertone to the cloy of the roses.

I came to a stop before the statue. The marble lady saw me when nothing living could. The crown of yellow roses made her appear to bow her head with sorrow, and her open arms seemed to invite me to share my soul.

At that moment, a longing sharper than thorns filled my heart. I wished, desperately, that the statue could speak. She could tell me what exactly it was I longed for.

Her hand remained empty.

You long for something, too. Something I took. I held up the daisy, its stem bruised and seeping. The petals had gone soft and dull. To put it in her clean white hand seemed an insult. Instead, I laid it at her feet. A broken offering.

"I'm sorry," I mouthed. I couldn't speak. My throat held too much emotion. An emotion I couldn't place.

For the second time in my life, my senses failed me. I didn't smell cinnamon and musk mingling with the perfume of roses. I didn't hear the soft sounds of petals being crushed. I stood and stared and wondered if the royal rose would ever bloom again. If the kingdom would. And, deep down, if something was waiting to bloom in me.

I turned to leave. I froze.

He gazed through me at the empty hand, or perhaps he stared as best he could at me. I tiptoed and held my breath as I left, hoping that he hadn't noticed my presence. His head turned and followed me.

Maybe I can get away with him simply staring. He does that a lot. My frustration had flared the moment I saw him, and without Seline, I did not trust myself to speak. I couldn't risk him changing his visits to every fourth evening or not at all. I tried another step, reaching the first of the blossom-heavy bushes.

"I know you are there."

Wonderful. Now I've offended him by not acknowledging him as a good servant ought. Just remember to call him Master. I half turned, ready to escape if he ordered me to leave. "Forgive me, Master, I thought you would prefer to be alone."

"I do not see Lady Seline. Did Lady Marguerite—"

“Oh, no. She has not bothered us.” I saw a flash in his too-human eyes. I shouldn’t have interrupted him. “Seline gave me the afternoons to myself.”

He rolled his eyes skyward. He and Seline would have no end of disagreements if they married. *If*. “Why are you here?”

His voice, rocks and glass and depth. It made it difficult to judge his emotions. He did not sound angry, though he also seemed far from at peace. He’d become angry if I stayed silent, though. “I am not completely sure. Thinking.”

He grunted a deep, whatever-would-a-servant-think sort of grunt.

Since conversation seemed inevitable, I faced him fully and prepared for another tedious few minutes. He didn’t seem as terrifying in the sunshine as he had long ago. Maybe because he wore a royal blue cloak instead of midnight blue. His silver horns still glinted, and his thick fur held just as many shadows, but his horrible, twisted face no longer scared me. I even thought, perhaps, it looked sad.

Not sad enough. Not sad enough to try.

“And you?” I said. Then I remembered I was only to answer questions, not ask them. He may call me lady to spite Madame, but I was still dirt to him.

“Thinking.”

There was the gruffness I knew. I pressed, a little ball of glee building inside me. “About?”

His eyes flickered to the remaining rose and back to me. “Lady Seline would not like you if she could hear you.”

“Surely you came to contemplate more lofty thoughts than that, Your Highness.”

“Always, always this way,” he muttered.

I sighed. “Doesn’t anyone ever tease you?”

“I have been trying. I have been nice. Yet you continue to behave...” He dropped to all fours and began to pace back and forth in front of the statue.

“I didn’t start this conversation,” I said. There wasn’t much room, and I had to step backward, pricking myself on the rosebush. My frustration got the better of me. “As for trying, I’ve barely spoken these past few weeks. You, however, have not tried.”

Beast stopped and growled low. “What?”

“You speak better,” I said, “and you talk to her. But you’re simply not—not—” I couldn’t say ‘not being lovable.’ That wasn’t right. The phrase made him sound like a child’s dolly. I was looking for something more adult and dashing.

“You are nothing and I do not care what you think.”

“I’m glad to see my words don’t upset you.” I crossed my arms. “I know about the fairy’s curse. That Seline needs to fall in love.”

Beast bared his teeth. “Lady Marguerite.”

“Yes. She told me.”

He went back to prowling in his jerky, angry way. “Not her right. She meddles.”

“Believe me, I know.” It occurred to me that Madame hadn’t forbidden me to talk to *him* about the curse and her Command. Perhaps he could un-Command me, and then Seline would go from being a burden to being a true friend. “Madame ordered me to make Seline fall in love with you.”

He stopped pacing. Claws bruised the fallen petals as they dug into the ground. I held my breath, hope bubbling in my chest, until he burst it with a short, bitter bark. “Good luck.”

Heat flooded my face. “That’s it, isn’t it? You don’t care. About this castle, about yourself.”

"I care." He dug his claws deeper into the earth. Bits of petal peeked out, pleading for mercy.

"You don't act like it. Half the nights you don't visit us, and when you do, it's all rehearsed."

"It will not work." He dropped his voice to a whisper, and I had to strain to make out the words. "She treats me like a beast."

"You treat her like an obligation."

"And you treat me like a child," he said, whirling and flinging dirt.

I shook a clod off my skirt before it turned invisible. "Only because you behave like one. It's all 'me, me, me.' Did it ever occur to you that the rest of us don't like this, either? That until you messed everything up, we had dreams and hopes and futures? That we were visible? And Seline, she's been ripped from her family and her life, maybe forever."

"I only care about myself because no one else ever has."

I couldn't believe it. "You are so self-centered! The entire castle walks on tiptoe to please you, and before the curse, all the lords and ladies revolved around you and —"

"Please the prince, not Gautier," he growled. He threw a fistful of dirt and petals on the ground. "I was human then, but I was not a man in their eyes. You cannot understand."

Orphan. Cripple. I had spent most of my life trying to disguise my lame leg, but it hadn't turned me into a bitter brat. I let sarcasm drip from my words. "I suppose you've always treated servants as people? You know, like looking them in the eye, and asking about their thoughts and feelings?"

He opened his mouth to yell, but nothing came. He jutted out his jaw and squared his shoulders, his height casting me in shadow. "You chose to be a servant. You could have been a farmer's wife, or a baker's apprentice, or anything. I could never walk away from my birth."

His statement took me aback. Such a thing had never occurred to me. I wished I could make out his expression, to see if he were as serious as he sounded. "You don't want to be the prince?"

His lips parted, showing too many teeth. A grimace, or a grim smile? "What is wrong? You cannot argue with that?"

"No."

"I am disappointed. You fix my bow, complain about my speech—"

"Give me a moment. Perfection takes time."

He laughed at that. Long, resentful barks.

I scurried to the side, changing him from a dark silhouette to a mere beast. "Wait. I do have an idea."

The laughter stopped.

"Maybe, if you started treating other people decently, they may start caring enough to treat you like a person in return."

He shook his head. "You are such a servant."

"Case. In. Point."

"It is not an opinion, it is a fact." Sibyla should have given him a tail to lash. "You do not know. Courtiers are not sincere. They say one thing but mean another. People who you think are friends only want land, women want jewels. Or marriage to a crown."

"I've never been around courtiers," I said, "but I do understand." Robert. Madame. "I've been fooled before."

Beast looked straight at where I stood. "That is what you ask of me. That I fool Seline. That I pretend to love her, when in fact I only want to be human again. Lady Marguerite chose her servant well."

The blood drained from my face. *He's right. That's exactly what I am asking. Isn't it? For Seline to fall in love with a lie. Could her happiness last if he does not love her in return?*

When I didn't respond, he turned back to the lady statue. Despair wrapped the gravel in his voice like velvet. "And yet, I must woo her. I do think of the castle. Every day I think of the end that will come. I must betray my own beliefs. I must betray her heart."

Beast touched the statue's empty hand. His single finger filled most of her palm. "I hate Lady Marguerite and Lord Antoine. They have always seen me as a tool. I hate that fairy because she saw me as a puppet. Seline sees me as nothing but a crude beast. And you? How do you see me?"

The child's tantrums made sense. The rages of the beast, too. Yet the Command to make Seline fall in love still existed, warring within me. Warring with something else. Pity for him? For her? No, not quite pity. My thoughts, my insides, they all jumbled and made my voice tremble. "I do not know anymore. How... How do you see *me*?"

Beast turned, eyes flickering over the place I stood. "You are invisible. I do not see you."

He left. I crumpled to the ground, and my tears fell on bruised petals.

CHAPTER 16

That night, Beast did not come.

It puzzled Seline, and she asked after him, but there was no way to tell her of our fight. In the end, she shrugged and asked me to fetch her a different book, a romance she'd been reading when it was only the two of us. I'd listened with great interest on previous nights, a student to the author-master, but now I heard none of the words.

I could no longer hate him.

Empathy had destroyed my disdain. He had refused Lady Catin, for she had only wanted his title and money. The visitor from before, Lady Lucrece, had not accepted his proposal out of love. Instead, she must have coveted something, like the castle and its riches. And the fairy...

Sibyla had wanted to make him a puppet. What better way to control a kingdom than through marriage? Either she wanted to marry him herself—mortal and fairy unions did happen from time to time—or she wanted him to marry someone she could manipulate. Either way, he had refused to be controlled. Refused to be used.

Damn it all. I could admire him for that. I do admire him for that. Admiration was much harder to live with than resentment.

Seline stuttered over a passage and turned bright red. Something about 'breast' and kissing. She flipped one, two pages rather quickly.

Normally I'd burst out laughing, both at the descriptions and at Seline's discomfort. Tonight, I scowled. She should be reading the book about the sea, with Beast staring sightlessly at bouquets of flowers, knowing he should compliment them, whether he liked them or not. Because he needed her to love him...

"He is right about me," I told Seline. Her blush had deepened to crimson as she excused herself to pour water from the sideboard. "Without meaning it, I've wanted to manipulate him every bit as much as Madame has. I would have goaded him into mentioning the flowers tonight, and I would have been pleased at his discomfort."

In that way, I was worse than Madame.

Seline sat once more. Before she could begin again, I went to her and pressed the book down and away. With concentration, I gave her a quick hug.

Her eyebrow quirked. "What was that for? Skipping that section?"

"A thank you," I said. "You were right all along. I promise, from now on, I will be kind to Beast." I paused. "Or I'll at least try. He's prickly."

Seline heard nothing, of course, but waited patiently. I tousled her hair. She grinned. "It was awful, wasn't it?"

I laughed, and my breath tickled her hair. She touched her cheek and continued reading.

I took my seat, regretful but at peace. "I'll make it right."



He the next night. As the clock ticked, my chest grew heavier with Madame's Command.

"Is he sick again?" Seline asked me after it became clear he wasn't coming. She snatched a flower from the tea table's small bouquet. "Up and down for yes, side to side for no. Tell me the truth."

She hadn't said the words 'Command' or 'order,' but the light demand tingled over my skin. She meant it. With reluctance, I took the stem. *He's sick with despair.* But I didn't know that for sure. He could have been sick with disgust for me, and I knew full well Seline meant a physical illness.

I waved the flower side to side.

"No," she mouthed. Instead of smoothing, the line of worry in her forehead deepened. "He's staying away, then. I thought he had enjoyed himself at the performance. Unless... I upset him?"

I waved the flower side to side again. *I'd* been the one to upset him, and while he found Seline's *existence* upsetting, she wasn't the source of his pain. It was Sibyla's decree.

Seline gave the flower a soft smile. "Thank you for your kindness, but I heard him that night. *What was.* The performance affected him somehow. Made him remember something unpleasant, perhaps."

Gah! She didn't know the magic made me tell her the truth. I didn't lie for her comfort. But, no! The one time the magic would work in my favor, Seline didn't know the rules.

I bopped her on the head with the flower for being silly. She laughed but became more resolved in her idea.



As Seline lived in false cheer. Madame's Command made it difficult for me to think of what to do, until I realized that part of Seline's sadness was a sincere desire to see Beast. She'd developed affection for him, and she cared enough to worry for him. To miss him. The weight lightened by half, instantly.

Except.

The Command be damned. I want her happy again.

We got through the day.

Another night. Seline waited until the teapot went cold before she sighed and poured a cup for the two of us. I ignored it. Cold tea was worse than hot.

"I don't feel much like reading," Seline said. "I think I'll sew."

I fetched her basket where we kept it in a corner, moved a candelabra closer, and watched her stare at fabric without doing much. Finally, I moved to the doorway. "Bertram?"

His presence neared. I asked him if he knew what was going on with His Highness.

"Every time I have reported to Lord Antoine, it has been in the East Wing," Bertram replied. Meaning, not with the prince. "As far as I am aware, he has not consulted with His Highness for days."

"How many days?" I said, already knowing with an uncomfortable certainty the answer.

Bertram considered. "Two? Three? I am sorry but I do not know for sure. The days blend together so."

The Rose Garden. Beast's talk of meddling. He'd shut out the true powers of the castle, along with Seline.

"Several of us have been taking his meals to him," Bertram added. "When I get off duty, I could inquire after him."

"No, there is no need." I knew what was wrong.

"If there is anything I can do to assist you—"

Seline's sigh cut him off. "Claudette, I think I'm going to bed early tonight. The walk earlier today fatigued me."

Her despondent smile broke my heart.

"She misses him," Bertram said. There was surprise in his voice. To think, someone actually missed our prince.

"That's why I asked." I sighed, and felt a prickle, deep down. I missed him, too, in an exasperated way.

Bertram fetched a candle, pledging once more to help as he could. He escorted us to Seline's rooms, where I put her to bed. In my own bedroom, I crossed off another day on the calendar. Then I crept back to Seline; she stared at the ceiling rather than sleep.

"It's not you. It's him. It's me." I took a breath, and it shuddered. Me and my temper, which was almost as bad as a beast's.

And the fairy. Don't forget Sibyla. That didn't erase my part of the blame.

Well. I could wallow in guilt, or I could own my mistakes. I didn't know how to fix them, but I did know someone who had tiptoed around Beast's moods for much longer than I had.

I swallowed my pride and went to the Lady of the Keys.

Despite it being early in the night, I found her in her chambers. The door creaked open at my knock. She sniffed. "Why, Claudette. How kind of you to honor me with your presence. Do come in."

"Madame," I said. The door shut behind me as I entered the lace-encrusted sitting room. "I am sorry to bother you at this late hour."

She laughed. "So demure. You want something."

"Yes." She'd been direct, so I could be direct, too. My stomach curdled at what I had to say. "I need help."

A book by the chair opened, but she did not invite me to sit. A page turned, and finally Madame spoke. "I thought you a resourceful girl."

"Not resourceful enough."

"Have you offended His Highness again?"

Not as much as you have. I wanted to parrot her question back at her, knowing what Bertram had told me of his seclusion, but I held my tongue. This was bigger than my hatred for her. "Beast will not see Seline."

"His Highness! Or 'Master.' You forget yourself."

I ground my teeth. "Master will not visit Seline."

"I warned you to not antagonize him," she said, her voice as dry as the pages she turned. "It is out of my hands now. You have thrown yourself under his whim. Remember? I am not allowed to meddle with Seline's life. You should not have interfered. Marie did not chafe him as you do."

"If you hadn't Commanded me to make Seline fall in love, maybe I wouldn't be compelled to speak up."

A page paused midair before falling backward. “Do you realize you blame others for your own shortcomings? Dreadful habit.”

“Madame—”

“I will not revoke the Command. My faith in you has vanished, but I’m opportunistic enough to allow room in my plans for a miracle.”

“If you would—”

“You are a clever girl. I suggest you become an acquiescent one.”

I ground my teeth together. I didn’t even know what that word meant, but it was clearly intended as an insult. I wanted to rip one of her overstarched doilies into a million pieces, but I gripped my hands into fists instead. “This. Isn’t. About. Me. It’s about Seline. And the castle.” Maybe *that* she would listen to. “Seline is depressed. She *misses* him. I need your help to convince him to come back, otherwise there is no falling in love and breaking the curse.”

The book snapped shut. A small glass of port rose and tipped. “His Highness keeps me at a distance. Ever since he reinstated you, he has been churlish. Several days ago, he stopped talking to me altogether. I get my orders through Lord Antoine now, and His Highness avoids him, as well.”

Her words confirmed what Bertram had told me. Yet another problem I’d created. “Perhaps if you—”

“You came asking me for help, and now you give advice?” The port disappeared. “We may only have a few days, but you’ve interfered enough. Go. Go, and do not bother me again unless I Summon you.”

The order propelled me into the hallway. A heartbeat later, the door slammed.

That failed. What had I expected? Her to welcome me? No. I’d hoped she would at least have a plan. She didn’t. I’d caught the hitch of desperation in her voice, for Madame did not know what to do, either.

I began walking toward the stairs with slow, thoughtful steps. If Madame didn’t know how to convince Beast to break the curse...

I stopped, hand on the banister, foot ready for the first step. I closed my eyes.

Seline is depressed, and so is Beast.

All this time, the prince had treated me poorly because I had not acted as a perfect servant ought. All this time, I’d blamed him for not acting as a prince.

This was my fault. And though I feared to see him again, it was up to me to make it right.



I down the dark hallway as fast as I could with my short leg. This late at night, there were few servants to hear my uneven footsteps, but it would only take one person to gossip. And what fantastic gossip! Claudette, of all people, going to the prince’s chambers, at night. Still, I couldn’t blame anyone for spreading such delicious news. Not long ago, I would have done the same.

Despite the solitude, I walked upon rugs when possible, dodging the shadowed treasures displayed here and there. My heart quickened as a large window came into sight: the end of the West Wing. Great double doors loomed on the northern end of the hallway; a golden handle shaped like a beast gleamed in the moonlight.

I slowed, my resolve crumbling. What exactly should I say? And how should I say it? I had no idea how to behave now. Subservient? Haughty? He knew about Lady Marguerite’s Command. Did he know it hadn’t been my choice?

The handle's fangs glinted at me; the fangs I'd have to cup my fingers under and pull. A lion. A nice, normal sort of beast. A symbol of power and royalty. And certain death.

I avoided the lion's head by knocking.

The door creaked open, revealing nothing but air. "Yes?"

Male. His valet? What is his name? I didn't know the uppers well, especially not the men. For the millionth time, I wished Sibyla could have allowed we servants to see each other. "I, um, wish to see Bea—His Highness."

He sniffed. We often identified those we didn't know by scent: stable people, kitchen people, floor and fireplace. I did not know how I smelled anymore. Apparently, decent enough. "Come in. Your name?"

I gave it, without my false title of 'lady.' He led me through the entryway and left me in a drawing room. I eyed the overstuffed chairs, but I couldn't sit. I paced instead, trying to distract myself.

Heavy drapes blocked all but a sliver of moonlight, making the colors difficult to make out, even with enchanted senses. Beast seemed to like dark: deep cherry wood, fabrics in rich shades of burgundy. The fireplace was framed by black marble, threaded with gold.

A mirror lay in shards upon the floor. A few nudges here and there, and the mirror would become whole again, magically restored like every other broken thing in the castle. The deep black of the rug took on a grayish hue around the shards. They had lain there a long time.

A glimmer caught my eye, and I veered toward it. There, beside the largest chair, rested a single, unbroken mirror. A lady's hand glass, face down, roses etched on the back. It looked absurd in this masculine room, all silvery and dainty. It was so small, it would only show a portion of Beast's face.

What was taking the valet so long? I had figured he'd be back by now to dismiss me, or Beast himself would have burst in. I needed him to listen, for Seline's sake, but I could already see the way his lips would curl from his fangs, the way his knobbled eyebrows would lower.

Without thinking, my fingers closed around cool metal as I lifted the hand glass to glance into it.

The glass didn't reflect the room behind me. Instead, colors swirled and reformed, showing me an image of Beast, his mouth moving silently as he ran a hand through the fur on his head. I whirled around, but he wasn't behind me.

Is that him, right now, in the other room? Creepy.

I glanced back at the mirror. Beast still talked to an invisible person as unseen hands straightened his clothing. Was he worried about meeting me? Unhappy? I couldn't understand his expression. Things would be so much easier if he still had his human shape.

The image swirled again, this time showing a shredded painting. In fact, I thought I'd seen... Yes! To my right hung a portrait. *Him*. I set the mirror face-down on the table and walked closer to the clawed canvas. I dared not lift the strips for I couldn't risk them mending. I burned with curiosity. I'd seen the back of his head once, but time had blurred the memory, and I couldn't even recall his hair color. Brownish, maybe. In the portrait, the low light and tears made the colors difficult to make out. Everyone said he used to be heart-stoppingly handsome, but in my experience those with money were always described so. The truth hung before me, dangling in misery.

The valet's presence reentered the room. I jumped, glad I had already put the mirror back.

“He will be here shortly,” the valet said. “Please, sit and be comfortable.”

Comfortable, ha! I took a seat and watched a door open and shut. The faint sound of another door: the valet going to his own rooms. That, or he had exited the chambers entirely, to leave me alone with the prince. I clasped my hands together in an effort to calm myself. It didn’t work.

Cinnamon and musk preceded him. Somewhere behind me, I heard the swish of a door. The heat he radiated crept into the room. I hadn’t noticed it outside in the sun, or at night by the fire. It intensified as he came closer, slipping over my shoulders, enveloping me fully. The pads on his feet rasped against the carpet.

I jumped to my feet and curtsied. “Master.”

He rumbled low in his chest. “You remember your manners.”

“I took the five seconds to think before I acted.” I mentally kicked myself. Already too informal. Already too like myself.

“And it goes away.” Beast gestured around the dark room. “Why are you here?”

I tried to tie my fingers in knots, but it didn’t work too well. “I, uh, came to make a request.”

He raised a knobbly brow. “A request? Rather than a demand? Is it insulting?”

Was he teasing me? I doubted he knew how to tease. Irritation, then. “It depends on how you view the request.”

“Let’s have it.”

I’d never be able to state it in a way he’d like, so I blurted it out. “I’m hoping you would resume your nightly visits with Seline.”

His eyes narrowed.

“I’m hoping you’d try to be her—her friend.”

He jutted his jaw in that way I was beginning to identify as stubbornness. “So that, through my friendship, she begins to love me.”

“No,” I said. Though a girl could hope. “I ask because she’s lonely.”

He waited, as if for more. My words tumbled out, and I lowered my eyes to the rug. Easier to stare at endless black than to watch his annoyance grow. “I can’t help her. I’m invisible and I’m mute. The only thing I can do is wave something around and hope she understands or laughs. It must be so hard for her, living in the silence. You, though, you can talk to her. You can have a real conversation. Please. I’m not trying to trick you. I only want Seline to smile again.”

He didn’t speak. I winced in the silence and kept my eyes on the dark rug. “Forgive me. I fear I have said something wrong. Again.”

“No,” he rumbled quietly. “She does not mind being with a beast?”

I shook my head, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t see. I often forgot with him, since he could hear me. “She finds the evenings pleasant now. She misses you when you don’t come. Even if it’s simply reading aloud to you, that will make her happy enough. She’s come to think of you as a prisoner here, too, and she wishes to make your imprisonment easier.”

He snorted. “Kind of her.”

“That’s the way she is,” I said. I raised my eyes to his unfathomable face. “May I dare say that, if not for the situation, you might actually enjoy her presence. She is thoughtful and kind. And honest.”

Silence.

I must have overstepped, daring to guess his feelings. I took a deep breath. I had one last bargaining chip, one I’d been reluctant to offer because of Madame’s Command. If he agreed to my suggestion, I prayed the action of reuniting them would be enough to satisfy the Command. That, or I could withstand the pressure to do more.

"If you are staying away because of me," I said, "I will leave in the evenings. I know I irritate you. And I've proven myself incapable of thinking before I speak. If it would make you comfortable enough to be around her, I shall try to make it so I'm never in the same room."

He shocked me by laughing. True, real laughter. Laughter so hard that he fell into the sofa behind him. I stayed frozen, partly because his laughter was ghastly, with barking and growling, and partly because I feared it would be followed by rage.

"Master?" I finally managed to squeak.

"I do not hate you *that* much," he said. He rumbled again, an aftershock. "What of your Command to make her love me? From Lady Marguerite?"

"I'm fighting it," I said. As long as I kept fooling the Command with little requests like this for Seline's overall happiness, I could bear the pressure. I hoped.

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't like to be controlled any more than you do." All he needed to do was lift the Command, and I'd be free. "I never wanted it to begin with."

His ever-searching eyes watched me from the sofa. Did he hold the power to release me? *Maybe he can't because Madame's Command involves the curse.* The enchantment likely controlled him as much as it did the rest of us.

"I believe you," he said.

A tiny bubble of hope. "Well?"

"Well," he repeated. His head turned to the shredded painting. I caught the sorrow this time in his mangled face. "I will meet with Seline again. The silence weighs on me as well. I had thought she did not enjoy my company. The evenings are tense. She smells... uneasy."

"She's afraid of offending you. You disappear so often. Tell her the truth. Tell her that it's me you cannot stand, and she'll relax because she'll know it's not her."

"But it is her," he said.

I couldn't have heard him right. "What?"

"You exasperate me, but you are... entertaining. In hindsight. Seline is the problem." His snout wrinkled. "Not her personally, but the expectation. Of what needs to happen. I do not feel that way toward her and yet I am supposed to—" He snapped his mouth shut, and I noticed fresh claw marks in the sofa.

I sat down. If he sat, then I could. "Don't uppers—ahem, nobles—usually prefer arranged..." I couldn't say the word marriage in front of him while he looked like a beast. "Relationships?"

"That does not mean we like them."

Right. For all I knew, his father had arranged for him to marry Sibyla. I tried again, feeling as awkward as I had when I was twelve, back when my breasts were expanding at an alarming rate. "Love breaks the spell, right? Everyone says you cannot control love. So... don't think about it. Focus on being nice to her and making her happy here. Make it more pleasant for yourself, too."

Beast's lip curled, exposing more of a fang. "You do not care what I feel."

"Not long ago, I didn't. Now, I cannot blame you for actions I would have chosen myself."

His claws loosened their hold on the upholstery. "You... understand?"

"You asked me how I see you," I said, standing in case he decided to magic me out for speaking my mind. "I couldn't answer, because I needed time to reflect."

"Oh?" He tensed, on guard. "What is your conclusion?"

My fingers were trying to knot themselves up again. "I see a man who is trapped by more than a fairy's malicious spell."

A heartbeat. Two. Beast crossed the room in two huge steps and gripped the handle that led deeper into his chambers. "You may go. I will see you tomorrow night, with Seline. It may even be enjoyable."

I let out a breath I did not know I had held and gave a lady's low curtsy. "Thank you, Master."

"Gautier."

I nearly fell over, mid-curtsy. "Excuse me?"

"My name," he said, as if I were a simpleton.

"I—I cannot call you that."

He lifted his hand, and I saw annoyance in the lips pressed around his fangs. "You lash me with that tongue of yours, approach me in my private quarters, and do everything a servant ought not, yet you cannot call me by my name?"

"Madame will flay me alive if she hears." My knees felt weak, and I realized I still hovered in my curtsy. "Literally flay me alive."

"Other than that, do you have an objection?"

I gave a hollow laugh. Madame rarely punished servants physically, but I doubted she'd hold back with me. "You clearly have never been whipped. I think it objection enough."

"But other than that?"

Other than horrible pain? "I guess... No. If that's what you order me to call you, I cannot object."

"I ask you to use my name." Ask, not Command.

Marie would flay me alive, as well. And ladies... If the castle were ever restored and there were ladies, they'd faint at the informality.

His features scrunched at my silence. "Master it remains, then."

"No! I mean—" I started to giggle. "You're as scandalous as I am."

His mouth stretched in a toothy smile. "If Lady Marguerite tries to whip you, call out my name, and I will come and stop it."

"I almost hope she tries. Very well. I will see you tomorrow... Gautier."

His horns glinted in the dim light as he nodded. His gaze flicked to the side as the door the valet had disappeared through earlier opened, and the servant returned. Beast—Gautier—cleared his throat. "Jacques, please escort Lady Claudette to her rooms. Then arrange for the tailor to come in the morning. I wish to review my wardrobe for tomorrow night."

The valet accompanied me in silence, which I appreciated. My mind raced. My begging had gone better than I'd dared to expect. Beast—*Gautier*. *His name is Gautier*. Gautier would see Seline, and she'd be happy again, and for tomorrow night she could wear—

No. *No*. I wouldn't plot or plan. The niggling nuisance of Madame's Command increased as we crossed into the East Wing, but I'd honor my promise to Gautier. I could dress Seline in a gown that flattered but rendered her not ravishing and desirable enough for marriage. I could focus on *Gautier's* comfort and enjoyment. If both of them were happy, that was a better chance for love. Surely the Command could content itself with that. And if love never came... at least the last days would pass with some good moments.

The valet left me at the Rose Suite, and I prepared for bed. As I fell asleep, planning-but-not-planning fell away into drowsy curiosity.

The portrait. The shredded portrait of the prince.

If Seline did not fall in love with him, I'd never know.

CHAPTER 17

I dressed Seline in a gown of silver threaded with black. Despite the shininess, it was one of the simpler gowns in her wardrobe. She held out her arms and allowed me to dress her like a doll. I tried to convey my excitement, but it was transforming into nervousness. He might change his mind. The evening could be a disaster. I barely ate dinner as my stomach churned its way into my chest.

I will offer again to leave, if I upset him. Though deep inside, my spirit sang, for he had requested me there, too. How silly, to feel so elated when only a short time ago I had never wanted to see him again.

"Lady Claudette," Bertram said, as we entered the room. "I asked around. His Highness still keeps to his rooms, though today his tailor and Lord Antoine visited him."

No mention of me. Good. "Thank you, but you didn't have to do that."

"I thought it may please you. Oh, Lady Seline just glanced at the tea service."

I rushed to her, eager to pour the tea. I had not found a way during the day to tell her about Beast—*Gautier*—but now I knew how. I poured her tea, along with my own, and I made a big show of pouring a third cup.

"Will Marie join us?" she asked. After all, she always waited until he arrived to pour the tea, even if he never drank his.

I set the cup, slowly and deliberately, in reach of his chair. Then I whisked mine to my corner.

Her eyes widened at that. Somehow she managed to flush and pale simultaneously. "I did not think to prepare—"

I pulled the book of the sea from the folds of my dress. Seeing her flush both pleased and annoyed me. Her eagerness lessened the pressure of the Command, but I wanted every reaction I felt to be my own.

She took the book and pressed it to her chest. "You think of everything. I shall be spirited tonight."

I patted her arm. She'd know soon enough. I hoped.

We did not wait long. I wondered if he had lurked in the hallway, listening to us. He did not slink into the room as usual, though he did not rush to his chair, either. He simply strode, smooth and purposeful. Like a man. Like a prince. Nor did he wear his usual shirt, breeches, and cloak. Instead, he wore golden breeches and a royal-blue dress coat, complete with a snowy cravat at his throat. He swept a bow to Seline the moment she noticed him.

"Beast," she said, curtsying low. If the improvement of his dress surprised her, she did not let it show on her face. She may have been too anxious to notice. "I am pleased to see you."

"Forgive me," he said. He motioned for her to sit, and as she arranged her skirts, he waved for me to bring over my small chair from the corner. "I fell ill but did not have a way to tell you. My physician says I am strong enough for company again."

"You were ill?" Seline shot a puzzled look at my moving chair. "I asked Claudette several days ago, and she told me you were well."

"She ordered me to tell the truth," I said. "Yes or no, if you were sick."

He paused only for a breath. "I kept it from the rest of the castle. To avoid causing distress."

That seemed to satisfy her. "I am glad you feel better. If you tire early, please say something. Do not exert yourself on my account."

"Do not worry." He squirmed in his seat with the lies, and he was surely blushing under all of the fur. I choked back a laugh.

"Would you like me to read?" Seline asked, waving the book. "Or shall we converse?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you, ah, would like to play a game?" As her surprise changed to pleasure, he continued. "Have you ever played Rocks and Diamonds? It is primarily a dice game."

"I have. But isn't it for four people?"

"I thought Lady Claudette may play." The edge of his cuff suddenly became interesting to him.

Seline laughed. "And if she makes some snarky remark during the game?"

"I will live," he said. "I may even become used to it."

"And the fourth?"

"For the fourth, there is a footman outside the door. Lady Claudette, would you ask him to join us?"

I jumped to my feet, practically floating. He was trying. Honestly trying. I found Bertram, who agreed to serve his prince, and the moment he stepped in, Beast—no, Gautier... How long would it take me to remember?—Gautier began to instruct Bertram on the laying out of a table as he himself brought over chairs.

"Do you know how to play?" Seline asked Bertram's chair.

Bertram coughed. "My lady, I believe she means you."

"Claudette," I said. No matter how many times I told him, he still wouldn't drop 'lady.' I tugged on Seline's skirt so she'd know I sat on her right. I had played a few dice games, but all involved drinking vast amounts of ale or slowly removing one's clothing. Or both. "I do not know this game."

"Nor I," Bertram said.

"Neither knows it," Gautier conveyed. His eyes narrowed at me. "You know your numbers?"

I flushed. "Of course I do. Even peasants can count. We have to eat and buy things, you know."

His face contorted; out of embarrassment or anger, it was hard to say.

"I've never seen a board this fine," Seline said, rescuing us both. What did it look like to her, Beast's silences as he listened to us? All she had to go off of were half conversations and his ambiguous expressions.

Gautier murmured something about inheriting the board, and then he asked her to tell us the rules. She relaxed as she explained how different dice combinations dictated the positions of the tiny colored pieces. I tried to focus on learning, but I felt hyperaware of the tension radiating from him. Already I could tell that the wooden pieces would be too small for his cumbersome hands. I admired his attempt, and I supposed dice in a cup were better than fumbling with cards, but I worried.

"To win, you collect all the disks," Seline said.

Gautier gestured to her. "Lady Seline, you may have the first roll."

Her slender hands scooped the three dice and dropped them into the cup. "If the others speak, Beast, you'll have to tell me what they say. Especially if Claudette's being impertinent. Ugh, that's not a very good first roll, is it?"

My turn came next. I rolled better and placed a piece accordingly. Before Gautier had a chance to despair over the dice on the table, I returned them to the leather cup and handed it to him.

His paw dwarfed the cup. He stared at it a moment, lips pressed together. He knew exactly what I had done, so there was no need for him to ask for assistance, and I couldn't tell if I had annoyed him or reluctantly pleased him by recognizing his weakness. The moment passed, and dice clattered on the table.

"Shall I move the pieces for you?" I said in a whisper. Seline could not hear me, but Bertram could, and I knew from observation that men and pride mixed in stubborn ways. Gautier grunted, a soft sound easily misinterpreted.

After the cup had made it around the table once, Seline started up conversation. "I haven't played a game in years."

"Neither have I," Beast said. His forehead scrunched. "Do you... How do you prefer to pass the evening?"

I tried not to bounce in my chair. Bertram shook the dice cup, oblivious to the implications of Beast showing interest in his guest.

"It's been so long since my family," she faltered on the word, "spent evenings together, aside from darning socks and the like. I used to embroider as Estelle read. Zara enjoyed games. I think more than anything, however, we loved hearing the stories Pappa learned at sea."

"I am afraid I do not know any of those," Beast said.

"She'll need to share them some evening," I said. Gautier's lip twitched, near his right fang, and I realized my words could be interpreted as the prodding advice I once gave. I quickly added, "I have never seen the sea."

"You?" Seline asked him.

He blinked. "Me?"

"What entertainments do you enjoy? And Bertram and Claudette, tell me what they say."

I grinned. "Yes, Bertram, how do you spend your nights?"

"Aside from sleeping?" he said, amusement in his voice. He coughed and mumbled "Forgive me" as he remembered our company. But my spirits were too high for me to restrain myself.

"I'm afraid you'll have to tell her that we're not exciting people," I said to Gautier. "Servants never are."

"Now, don't say that," Bertram said as Gautier opened his mouth to speak. "Lady Claudette, I hardly think a dull thought goes through your mind."

I laughed. "Please, you do *not* want to know what goes on in my mind."

"Now I *am* intrigued."

"What are they saying?" Seline asked, her eyes sparkling in the firelight.

"Lady Claudette is trying to convince Bertram that she is a dullard," Beast said, his voice full of the usual displeasure he had when discussing me.

Seline shook her head. The ringlets in her hair bounced. "She's never going to convince anyone of that. She's hilarious, even when she cannot be heard."

"Yes, well. When she does speak, it is almost always alarming," Beast said as he took the cup from me. The dice rattled to the point I feared they'd shatter.

This was not going at all where I wanted it to. They were supposed to be talking to each other, and not about me. Worse, I had already angered him. I tried to come up with a way to turn the conversation, but Bertram spoke first.

"Alarming? Forgive my liberties, Highness, but you have my curiosity."

"You don't need to know," I said.

"Embarrassing, eh?"

"Depends on the listener."

"Then I shall judge for myself," Bertram said. "I'll keep an ear ready to catch these appalling things you say."

"They are still talking?" Seline asked. Beast's eyes had been flickering back and forth between the empty chairs.

"I think," Beast said in a low rumble, "that Bertram is flirting with your lady-in-waiting."

I dropped one of my yellow disks on the floor.

"Forgive me," Bertram said. He sounded as embarrassed as I felt. "I was simply trying to be polite."

I scrambled upright in time to see Seline raise an eyebrow. "Is she flirting back?"

"No," Beast rumbled, his eyes fastened on Bertram's spot.

"Gah, can everyone stop talking about me?" I flung my disk on the table. Gautier had his jaw set in that way of his, and I finally found some inspiration. "Gautier, I forgot what to do with an odd roll over ten."

Bertram sucked in his breath at the informality of using the prince's name, but to my satisfaction, Gautier relaxed a bit as he explained the rule to me. When he finished, I brought the subject back to the two people who mattered. "You never answered Seline's question, Gautier. What do you enjoy?"

"Your lady just reminded me that I have not answered," Beast said to Seline. He emptied the dice cup, and I moved his pieces for him.

"Oh, yes," Seline said. "I'm guessing you like games?"

"I do. I enjoy interactive entertainments."

"Not so much the reading, then?" She didn't sound disappointed, just eager to find out more about him. Madame's Command relaxed further.

He shrugged. "I do not dislike it. I just... Pages are difficult for me to turn." He held up his hand, splaying his claws and taloned thumb.

Diplomatically said. But then, that was his life, wasn't it? Careful words, weighed meanings. I wondered about all those women back then who tried to flirt and flatter their way to a crown. I hoped he didn't think Seline wanted to please him in a similar way. After all, what motive could she have other than making life pleasant?

Getting back home. Though I believed in my heart, Seline had grown too fond to him for such trickery.

Usually, Seline averted her eyes from his hands. Now she gazed at them in the half-hidden fascination of someone who does not like what she sees but who cannot help looking. "I can see why books may be difficult."

"My hands make many things difficult." He looked to the side of the room where, past many many walls, a piano sat. "I enjoy listening to music, too. I had forgotten how much I miss it."

Seline kept her eyes on the dice cup as she tipped it over. "How long has it been? Since you last heard the piano? Aside from the other night, I mean."

The dice clattered onto the table, and she moved her pieces around. Her beast did not speak. The silence stretched. I thought about breaking it, but she couldn't

hear me. Bertram's seat creaked as he fidgeted, but I doubted she noticed. The creaks were too faint for unenchanted ears.

"There are things," Gautier said, every word stretched and raw, "that I am unable to say. I may wish to, or may not wish to, but it does not matter."

"Claudette was once visible, wasn't she?" Seline said in a whisper.

I gasped, and so did Bertram, and somehow I knew that we felt the same thing. A constriction around our hearts, the air escaping from our lungs. If I tried to touch her, or signaled yes or no in any way, I would not be able to. Gautier stiffened to complete stillness, just as he always did before flying into one of his rages. Suddenly, I understood.

He's not angry at everyone else. His tantrums are frustration with himself and the enchantment. The piano, the chairs. Dear lord, he lives every day loathing himself and what happened.

I placed my hand on his arm. Unlike when I touched Seline, I did not need to concentrate. Heat flowed under my fingers. "Tell her I could be a beast, a human, a whispering wind, or a ghost, but you cannot say exactly what I was or what I am. What matters is this: Tell her I love her, and I am her lady-in-waiting, and that is all she can know."

He relayed the words. Seline turned to me, her eyes glistening. She shook her head, the curls bouncing with a cheerfulness none of us felt. "I am sorry, I did not mean to cause... Let us try to forget it and enjoy the game. It looks like Bertram is winning."

My hand stayed on Gautier's arm. Underneath the velvet, he trembled with repressed emotion. I wished I knew his thoughts so I could better soothe him. If he abandoned us or flew into a temper, Seline wouldn't understand. She'd blame herself for sure.

"You are doing well," I said quietly. I took the dice cup with one hand, shaking it with my palm blocking the top. I thought Gautier heard me, but his chest didn't even move with breath. The dice clattered on the table. "I know this is hard, but you are doing very well. Can you ask her about the book she's reading? Yes. I heard her laughing at something she read yesterday, but I couldn't ask about it. I'm curious."

He repeated my words, flat and rough, as I handed him the dice cup.

"Yesterday?" said Seline. "When I was reading... How rude of me! Of course she'd wonder." Seline launched into a topic I cared nothing about, save that it distract us all.

The rest of the evening clunked onward, with Gautier asking the questions I prompted. Finally the idle chatter relaxed him enough that he carried the conversation on his own. Bertram barely spoke, but that was expected. He was a proper servant, like Marie. *Bertram's probably embarrassed by what happened earlier and is determined to mend his ways. Best not to join the scandalous fool.*

Then I fumbled the cup, spilling dice and dropping it to the floor. Gautier picked the cup up for me, his twisted mouth repressing a smile. *On second thought, our prince's acceptance of my familiarity may shock Bertram more. The poor man may never recover.*

The game ended late, and some semblance of laughter had made its way back into our hearts. Bertram won. He apologized to everyone for his good luck, especially to His Highness and Seline. Gautier did not relay the apology. Bertram's proper humility annoyed me, too.

Seline gathered the remaining pieces into the wooden tray. "I had fun tonight."

"I am glad," Beast said.

She gave him one of her light-filled smiles. How could it not melt him? “Thank you, for the pleasurable evening. Sleep well, Beast.”

She curtsied. He bowed. As she turned to the door, he gazed at me.

“Did you have fun?” I asked.

He tilted his head.

I beamed. “Ha! As we lessers say, I told you so.” His eyebrow rose, and I smiled wider. “Truly, it was a wonderful evening. She enjoyed it. I did, too.”

Seline slipped through the door, following the candle Bertram carried in the hallway. I lifted my skirts and scurried after.

As I passed into the hall, I heard a single word wrapped in gravel and velvet.

“Good.”

CHAPTER 18

“*M*y Lady Claudette,” came a voice the next afternoon as I took my Seline-ordered walk.

I paused in front of a lilac bush. I couldn’t immediately identify the man’s voice, so I Sensed.

“Bertram?” I said in surprise. I’d yet to encounter a servant in the gardens, save the gardeners. Alarm prickled my neck. “Is it Seline? Is she—”

“Oh, no. Nothing of the sort. I merely heard that you frequent the gardens in the afternoons, so I came in hope of hearing some of these scandalous things you say.”

“You did not hear enough of them last night?”

“Not nearly enough.”

I blushed, remembering Gautier’s accusation of him flirting with me. *Why not? Marie has Hugh. And at least Bertram’s not interested in my cleavage.* Still... Did I want to flirt back? My failed romance with Robert dampened my enthusiasm for another. Not to mention, Seline and Gautier were exhausting enough.

I cleared my throat. “I’m afraid I’m not saying much to the flowers.”

“I can be patient.”

That made me laugh. A point in his favor. When I took a few steps past the lilac bushes into the lavender, Bertram stayed alongside me. “The Lord of Accounts gives his footmen time for themselves?”

“My rank receives time,” he said, “but only twice a week. And you? You receive leisure in the afternoon. Is the rest of your day with Lady Seline?”

“It is.”

Bertram made a soft sound, somewhat wistful. “Serving her must be more pleasant than standing outside empty doors.”

“It is, and it is not. Communication is an issue.”

“You seem to communicate well enough with her.” He paused. “You and His Highness seemed on good terms last night. I had the impression that the two of you hated each other.”

I stumbled to a stop. We stood under an archway covered with some vining plant. How picturesque.

“‘Good terms,’ as you put it, may come and go,” I said. It occurred to me that Lord Antoine may have sent him to spy on me, for Madame. I didn’t like the idea at all. I shifted my weight to my good foot.

“Something changed, though,” Bertram said. He stood close enough that I could feel tiny currents on my cheek as he breathed.

“We called a truce,” I said, my words clipped, “for Seline’s sake. Though I am not sure how it concerns you.”

The currents left. He had taken a step backward. “Forgive me. It is rude to pry. My curiosity got the best of me.”

I tried to rein in my hostility, but my suspicions stayed. I forced a smile, though I doubted it would make it into my voice. "It would be wrong for me to think badly of another's curiosity when I have so much of my own."

We resumed the walk. He made the faintest swallowing noises, as if he were trying to find a neutral thing to say and failing. I let him suffer. Maybe he was innocent. Maybe Lord Antoine controlled him as Madame controlled me. Then again, I had known too many servants who abandoned morals for the promise of a promotion.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm my frustration, and my eyes widened in panic. *That is the last thing I need right now.*

Cinnamon. Musk.

Up ahead, a row of flowering bushes divided the lavender garden from the next. I cleared my throat and raised my voice.

"How long have you been at the castle, Bertram?" I said. I plopped on a bench, hoping that by staying in one place I could increase our chances of not running into Gautier.

The relief in Bertram's voice bordered on pathetic. "About ten years before the, well, you know. My brother secured me a position as a page, and I worked myself up. You?"

"Six years prior," I said. Did I speak too loudly? I couldn't know, not being able to see Bertram's reaction. "When I was twelve. Floor drudge. Um. A page. That's interesting. They meet everyone. Lords, merchants, farmers, everyone."

As we talked about nothing I cared about, the cinnamon faded.

Bertram stayed by my side for the rest of the afternoon. My awkwardness vanished with the cinnamon, and soon I found I enjoyed talking to him. He was overly formal, but also kind, and he told the stories of what he'd seen with great skill. The hostility trickled away, replaced by shame. *Of course he's curious. How many servants call their prince by his first name? For that matter, how many servants talk to the prince?*

Eventually, I steered us back to the castle; I'd felt a gentle tug. "Seline is calling for me. Thank you for the afternoon. It was nice to talk to someone who talks back." *Or who doesn't growl.* Yet, deep down, I felt a little regret that I hadn't sought out Gautier in the garden. I pinched myself.

"Anytime I can save a lady from boredom." There was a sound of rustling, and a piece of paper appeared. "Though I must confess, I had an errand as well. I wrestled this from another footman. He was to deliver it to you, and I convinced him that, by passing it to me, I'd be in his debt forever."

I grinned. "Isn't that a bit drastic? Forever?"

"Ah, well. For a few days, at least." I definitely heard a blush.

My grin died. *Forever. Days.* The two were more similar than I liked.

He handed over the note. The paper felt smooth as silk under my fingertips, and the color was perfect cream. A glob of dark purple wax, imprinted with a rose, sealed the letter.

Rather than open it, I shoved it in my pocket and turned it invisible. "I will see you tonight."

We entered the castle and parted ways. I dared not peek at the note. Anyone could spy. With every step I took toward Seline, the stiffness in my pocket chafed against my thigh. Why on earth had Gautier written me?

Curiosity intensified as I helped Seline dress. I still did not remove the letter, not with her chatting at me. What if it said something she ought not know? Besides, I couldn't read it, and there was no reason to open it. Unless...

I'd see the handwriting, know if Gautier wrote it himself rather than dictate it to a servant. Except, there was no way he could have written it himself, not with his hands. And Gautier wouldn't have dictated something important. The letter could wait.

It stayed in my pocket throughout dinner, as well, for a servant always hovered nearby to fill my glass. Important or no, I did not want some invisible snoop creeping behind me to look over my shoulder. Finally, Bertram fetched me, then Seline, and took us to the drawing room. He spoke not a word about the note.

Somehow, that made me more suspicious. *What if it is not from Gautier at all? Lord Antoine might have access to the royal seal. He does keep the accounts.* It would fit with Madame's scheming to pass me a letter that appeared to be written by Gautier but in fact had been dictated by her or Lord Antoine.

Seline picked up the teapot and poured tea for two. The third cup stayed upside down. The sight soured my stomach; it was her assumption that Beast would return to his habit of visiting every third night.

Gautier enjoyed himself last night. He nearly smiled a few times. He should be here again.

I glanced at the doorway. Empty. A Sense. No Bertram, so he'd not stayed to greet His Highness, either.

Seline carried her teacup to the far corner. "I have a surprise! I talked aloud in the hallway this afternoon and finally found someone to get these."

I'd been so preoccupied with the note, I hadn't even noticed. In the corner, two canvases were set up with painting frocks hanging from the easels. Several standing candelabra made the corner blaze.

I tied her frock, but pushed away the one she offered me. I'd never painted before in my life. Painting was an upper pastime. I didn't mind trying it, but I really wanted to peek at the note while she wasn't paying attention.

"Are you sure?" Seline asked. "Don't be shy. I have absolutely no skill. I haven't done this since I was a little girl."

I took the frock from her and set it down, then handed her a brush. She didn't take it but suggested we do something else. I shook the brush and made swooping motions over the canvas.

"If you insist."

I waited, patiently, as she began. Once she became absorbed in daubing light blue everywhere, I Sensed. Empty room. Clear doorway. Really, I was being paranoid; no servants ever joined Seline and me in the evening. I crouched behind a chair so I'd be out of Seline's sight—and out of sight from the hall—and pulled out the note.

With a shaky finger, I broke the seal. Handwriting, only a few sentences worth, covered the page in a large scrawl. Even someone as illiterate as I could tell the script was frightful. At the top of the page, I made out my name. The orphanage had insisted that I learn to sign my documents instead of using the common peasant 'X.' Little good the knowledge did me now.

Though I *did* know, from the scrawl, the note wasn't some plot of Madame's.

I ran my finger over the scribbled lines. He hadn't written much. The shakiness traveled from my hand to my middle. He shouldn't have written anything at all. Didn't he know I couldn't read—with a flush, I remembered. I'd told him, during the game, that I knew my numbers. *Damn it. He thinks I'm educated.*

I went back over the note, searching for a clue. He had written a word before my name. *Dear? Lady? Repulsive?* My mouth went dry. Did the handwriting look angry? So angry that he couldn't *whoosh* me back and forth to yell at me in person?

The useless paper went back into my pocket. I returned to Seline. She globbed green paint on the center of the canvas, humming. To her, Beast would return in two days. To her, everything was normal.

Because it is normal, you dimwit. He'd never come two nights in a row before. Best to go ahead and try my hand at painting. At worst, I'd distract myself. At best, I'd get a good laugh at the results, maybe even show Bertram—

I froze as I reached for a brush. *Bertram.* He'd taken the note from another footman. How long had he held on to it? All morning?

What if the note asked me to meet Gautier this afternoon in the gardens?

My hand fell to my side. Gautier was angry with me. Angry enough to set up a meeting, and had I not spoken loudly to warn him of Bertram, he would have appeared to yell at me and—

Seline began to giggle. "Goodness. I'm worse than I remembered."

I snuffed my panic and looked at her... what? I grabbed a brush and used the handle to make confused circular motions over her picture.

She laughed harder. "That green thing is supposed to be a tree. Here, I'll add some more brown to the trunk. There. That better? I'm not sure it can get any worse."

I grinned and flipped the brush around, dunking the hairs in blue. I daubed a blob in the center of the green haze.

She tilted her head to the side. "I hate to tell you, but apples are red. Not blue."

I stretched to tap on the window pane. The window swung open and soft chirping filled the study.

"That's an awfully large cricket. And it's daytime." She pointed to the upper corner of the canvas. "See the sun?"

I used a smaller brush to add a short line of yellow to one side of the blob.

Her giggles began anew. "The painting can get worse! Claudette, that does not look like a bluebird at all!"

I cleaned the brush and dipped it in red.

"A cardinal now? Ooo, put her here. They're singing to each other." She sprinkled purple on the ground. "Flowers! It's springtime. Flowers can't be difficult, right? Just little dots of color."

The laughter and silliness calmed me. Maybe—or maybe not—Gautier had asked me to meet him in the garden. Not to yell, though, for he'd never hesitated to yell at me in the past. And not to tell me he was giving up; he'd enjoyed the game.

Seline added some finishing touches and looked my way, her eyes shining. "I'm sure I was better when I was ten. Let's leave it here for Beast. I want to hear his laughter when he sees it." Her nose wrinkled. "I bet his laugh sounds dreadful. No matter. Everyone needs some joy."

We left the mess for a maid to clean. I didn't twinge with guilt for leaving so much work. If it had been me, I'd have been happy to have something new to do.

I helped Seline to bed, and my happiness held. Mostly. I couldn't read the note... but Marie could. I wouldn't see her until morning, so it did no good to fret all night. I crossed one more day off the calendar and slipped the note under my pillow. And in my dreams, Madame did not dismiss me from the castle.

Gautier did.

CHAPTER 19

Marie rummaged through my wardrobe, putting away some new gowns. I quietly moved the note from under my pillow and slipped it behind a keepsake box so she wouldn't snatch it with the sheets. I'd decided to ask her to read it to me but... how would she react? Me, receiving a letter from the prince! If I was wrong and Gautier had chosen to yell at me through the note, it'd be even worse. Marie would go from shocked to panicked.

He's not angry. The words had become a mantra. *It's instructions, something about the enchantment. Focus on what's really important: keeping it from Madame.* I didn't want to give the Lady of the Keys any information she could twist into revenge. Nor did I want her using the note's contents to hurt those I cared for, all in the name of ending the curse.

Then again, Gautier could simply be yelling at me. My pride didn't want Madame gloating, either.

Marie. I could trust Marie. Now, to find out if she'd survive the scandal of the prince writing a common servant.

"Are you feeling well?" Marie asked. None of us fell ill anymore, so she must have picked up on my emotional distress. "You've been standing there for minutes. Do you not like the dress I picked out?"

"I'm thinking." *How do I bring it up?*

"About a certain footman?"

"What?"

"Did he not find you in the garden yesterday?"

It took a moment to shift my thoughts. "Bertram?"

A mug of cocoa floated to me, and a chair slipped out from my table, beckoning. "Who else? He pestered half the castle trying to find you."

This was an excellent opportunity to bring up the note. I didn't. "So?"

She giggled and her own mug tipped. "Bertram didn't just look for you. He's been asking where you're from, what things you like."

"What types of things?"

"Oh, flowers. Interests. That sort of thing." Her cup waved.

I did not drink from my mug. "Did he ask Robert?"

"He did go to the stables."

Great. I'm sure Robert shared all sorts of lies.

"I hear he threw a horseshoe at Robert. Missed."

"That's in his favor, then." I finally sat and took a sip of cocoa. "You think Bertram likes me?"

"Claudette, you are often blind, but I think it's obvious enough, even for you."

"It's gossip."

Her mug clinked to the table. "You're not flattered?"

"Oh, I am, but..." My forehead wrinkled. "I should be squealing right now, shouldn't I?"

"You have a lot to think about, with Seline." Good friend, to forgive a girl for not being flighty when she should. "Though I am surprised by the lack of squeals."

I pressed my lips together. If Bertram were simply spying on me, why go to the trouble of finding out my favorite flower? "I barely know him."

She laughed. "Squealing is not the same as accepting a proposal for marriage."

I sighed.

"No, it's good to be cautious. Normally you rush into things without thinking."

"Like Robert."

"Stop kicking yourself for that. Did you go with him to the hayloft?"

I flushed. "I almost did."

"Almost is almost. It's not the same as did." The empty mug floated to the tabletop, and her chair slid away. "Let's get you dressed."

Marie got me ready for the day in silence, likely letting me mull over Bertram, for whom I spared not a thought. The moment she tied the last lace, I pulled her back into the bedroom.

"You can read anything, right?" I said.

"Now I know there is something wrong. Surely you don't want me to teach you to read?"

I snatched the note from its hiding place and waved it. "You used to write all those letters, so that means you can read."

"I wrote to my sister, who was two. Not very difficult, writing to a two-year-old. What's that?" I gave it to her. The letter turned over in the air, partially unfolded, then stopped. "You already have a lover?"

"No! Of course not. What man would send his illiterate lover a note?"

"You stole it?"

"Marie!" How could she believe I'd... Well. I had done dumb things before, damn my curiosity. "Just read it."

The note unfolded completely and lowered as she sat in the chair by the bed. "Goodness. The handwriting is awful. This is going to take a moment."

"No hurry." I rocked back on my heels rather than pace.

The minutes stretched. I burned inside to see her face, to see if she was intrigued or upset or puzzled. Finally, the paper crinkled as she set it in her lap.

"Well?" I said. "Were you able to read it?"

"It says: 'Dear Claudette. Thank you for last night. I could not have made it through the evening without you. I am sorry for my earlier attitude. I will try. But not for Seline. For you. —G.' Claudette, who is 'G'?"

I didn't answer.

"You cannot have me read a note and then—" Marie gasped. "It can't be."

I didn't answer.

The paper folded quickly, reforming the seal. "Why is the prince writing you notes?"

I winced at her sharp tone. "Because your friend is a fool who speaks and acts without thinking."

The note shot upward and fluttered about the room. "You—you're a parlormaid! The prince shouldn't even be speaking to you, let alone writing to you!"

"I'm a lady-in-waiting. The prince speaks to those girls." I squeezed the bridge of my nose. I knew she'd act this way. "Listen, around a week ago, I sort of yelled at him—"

"You did *what*?"

“Yelled at him. Not for the first time. We tend to make each other lose our tempers.”

Marie didn’t speak intelligibly.

“It made him avoid Seline, and she was so unhappy and I grew desperate. I went to his chambers—”

Marie’s sputtering changed to half choking.

“I went to his chambers to apologize. We reached an understanding, and the other night we played this game, and...” *And now he’s writing me notes.* I took the trembling piece of paper. “Thank you. I needed to know. If he had been upset—”

Relief hit me harder than I’d expected. He hadn’t called me to the garden to yell. It had been a coincidence. The note, a mere thank-you. *Not for Seline. For you.* My heart flipped, and I felt ill in a way I couldn’t identify. Definitely uncomfortable.

Marie took a deep breath. “So you’re trying to tell me that you are... friends. With the prince.”

“Friends.” A slow smile spread across my face. “I suppose, yes. I am friends with Gautier.”

“And you use his name!”

“Please, Marie.” It took two swipes, but I found and squeezed her hand. “He asked me to. He’s lonely. No one understands him.”

“You hate him. You were always blaming him for—”

“Not anymore.” The mugs of cocoa were empty, so I pulled her to the Rose Suite’s sitting room to pour her a glass of wine. It was early, but the girl needed something. Marie took it without protest. I hoped Seline didn’t mind sleeping in. “I did hate him. I did blame him. But it’s different now. Somehow. He’s not so bad, despite the fangs.”

“Now you’re joking about the prince.”

I sighed. “He is *not* the prince. I mean, he is. But he’s also a man. A person. Like us.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

She drained the wine. “I won’t. Remember, I’m the one with sense.”

I laughed. “You are.” Then I turned serious. “But it’s more than that. There are people I don’t trust.”

What would Madame see in the note? She’d find a way to use it, I was certain. I didn’t want her to hurt Seline. Or Gautier. Or anyone.

Good grief, Claudette, you’re overreacting. It’s a thank-you note. “Please, Marie. Don’t tell.”

She poured herself another half glass. “Sometimes, I think you *want* to be thrown out.”

“What about him? Why aren’t you scandalized that he’s lowering himself by befriending me?”

The glass paused mid-tip. “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“If Gautier, the prince, wants to be friends with a parlormaid, isn’t it alright?”

Silence. She drained that glass, too, and set it on the side table with a definitive *clink*. “I won’t tell. But don’t ask me to read anything else.”

“Fair enough.” What she didn’t know, Madame couldn’t order her to tell.

“I don’t want to talk about it, either.”

That stung. From anyone else, I could understand. He was a prince, currently in monster form. Most of the servants feared or hated him. Mostly feared. But this was Marie, the girl who had befriended me back in our floor-drudge days, in spite of the

others' teasing. She'd put up with my silly pranks and willful nature, and she'd stayed my friend after our new assignments. I'd cried with her over Robert. I'd swooned with her over Hugh. Since Seline, I'd felt even closer to her. I *wanted* to talk about Gautier.

"Claudette, I still want to be friends. But this... This is too much for me."

"I see." We stood in the Rose Suite, next to furniture so expensive a single chair was beyond our wages. The prince's words were in a pocket sewn with fabric finer than I had a right to wear. I could see. It still hurt. I covered the hurt with false cheerfulness. "Maybe next time I meet Bertram, I will find something squeal-worthy."

If the etiquette-obsessed spy wasn't a spy.

My heart didn't care one way or the other. Friends, sure. Flirting, fun. But anything more? No. Not with Bertram.

Marie also spoke with what seemed like false cheerfulness. "I will squeal with you, or I will curse his name with you if he turns out to be a rascal."

Good grief. Her words slurred a little, from all the wine. It'd take her extra time to do her duties. "We'd both better get back to our tasks."

She took the opportunity to flee, murmuring a soft "Thank you" behind her. I opened the curtains and looked out on yet another beautiful day.

He didn't hate me. *Gautier will come tomorrow night and... Will Seline's painting make him laugh? I hope so, even though he sounds terrible.* I found myself smiling out over the perfect gardens below. The desire for Gautier's laughter was *my* desire; it was not contrived to further Madame's Command. I wanted to hear him laugh because the thought of his happiness made me happy.

I barely knew myself anymore.



and early afternoon zoomed by with a game of charades, Seline doing all the guessing as I mimed with scarves and objects. Then she shooed me away as she drifted into the library. I roamed the halls for a bit, uncertain. *Does Bertram have today off? Surely not two days in a row. But if he has been asked to spy on me...* I gave the brushes scrubbing the floor a look of envy. Floor drudges did not worry about ambushes in gardens.

I couldn't avoid him forever. *Just today.* I headed for the southern gardens. There were no flowers, just sculptures made of shrubs. Bertram wouldn't think to find me there. Better yet, the bushes would block the view from the garden we were in yester—*Idiot. He can't see you.*

If Sibyla had given us another ten years, would I have grown used to being invisible?

I found the garden. The servants always whispered about the splendors of the Rose Garden; how people came from other kingdoms to see the magical twin roses. Not so for the shrubbery. No one went there, except during balls. The hedges were close enough to the South Hall that, should wine and flirting get out of control, the nobles could relieve their passions with only a few leafy spectators.

"And how did you feel about that?" I said to a twiggy mare as I brushed the leaves under her chin. "No one caring about you. The gardener who loves you must cry himself to sleep every night. Or used to, when there were people around to ignore his work."

"Do you always talk to the topiary?"

I whirled around. Gautier stood there, downwind, with a lot of teeth showing. A smile. "Gautier, I—You see, I um—"

"No witty remark?"

"You caught me off guard."

"I am disappointed."

"No you're not. Your eyes are sparkling. You're happy to have embarrassed me."

"You don't sound angry."

"No, I—" I gave a little half laugh. "I suppose not. Why are you haunting me?"

His gaze fell to the ground, and he prodded some grass with his toe. We lower-class and our blunt questions.

"Today," I said, pressing him. "And yesterday, near the lavender, when I was with Bertram."

"Ah." His face twisted. "Do you often spend time with that footman?"

Gautier's growling undertone confirmed my suspicions. *Bertram is in Lord Antoine's confidence, the spineless snake.* "Why do you think I'm hiding in the shrubbery? He thinks I adore flowers, so he'll never think to Sense for me here."

"I see." He cocked his head. "Do you? Like flowers?"

I rolled my eyes. "That cannot be why you are following me."

"It is not. I came to ask for your opinion."

"My opinion? A servant's opinion?" I grinned. "You promise not to yell?"

He grimaced and folded his arms. It kept his claws farther from the bushes, for he could decapitate the nearby giraffe with one swipe. "You use that impertinent mock of yours, and you think it will not anger me?"

"I am only teasing you." I spotted a stone bench a few feet away and sat on it. *Behave. It must be difficult for him to ask for a servant's opinion.* I sobered. *A servant whom he told to use his first name, as a friend.* "I am sorry. Please. I promise to treat you seriously."

He went back to the grass-scuffing. "Do you think, perhaps, that it will not bother Seline if I visited more often? In the evenings, of course."

I hadn't expected that; Gautier being considerate. "I don't see why she'd be displeased."

His hunched shoulders told me he didn't believe me.

He truly worries about her opinion. He'd changed. He was thinking of another. Hadn't Marie said that people in love—I squeezed my fingers into fists. Damned Command! Why couldn't I forget it? At least the realization had decreased the Command's pressure... In fact, I barely felt it at all.

That unsettled me.

"I am certain Seline will be pleased," I said, and shook away the odd feeling. "You are the only one she can talk with. And, forgive my honesty, but she does not fear you as she did in the beginning."

He grimaced again. He looked particularly hideous when he did that. "If only *She* made me look like something more... more... normal." He glared at the lion-shaped hedge that crouched beside the bench.

"Seline would have feared a talking lion just as much as she did you. What matters is she doesn't fear you now." I grinned. "Besides, your horns are nice. All shiny. And as toothy as your smile is, it's much better than your scowl."

He grunted.

"Come tonight," I said. "Ask her if you can visit more often. She'll be delighted. Moreover, we have a surprise for you."

He startled. "A surprise?"

I laughed. "Don't be too excited. It's underwhelming."

"You..." He cleared his throat. "You will not be annoyed to put up with me every night?"

I blinked. The breeze shifted direction, rustling the leafy animals and bringing me cinnamon and musk.

"No one's ever asked me what I want," I said. Warmth, not from sunshine, washed over me. "Usually, I'm Commanded."

He stared straight at me. "You don't Command a friend."

"Well. In that case, I'd be happy to see you." My heart giggled. "Provided you can handle my teasing."

"I'll endure. 'Til this evening." He bowed, as if to a lady. While bent, he grunted. "I do not hear skirts. A lady is to curtsy in greeting and in parting."

His light chastisement thrilled me. The lady's curtsy took more balance than the maid's dip, and I was glad he couldn't see how terrible I was at it. I probably held my skirts wrong, too.

He took his leave. I lifted my skirts and skipped as I returned to Seline.

CHAPTER 20

Gautier's favorite drawing room had never looked so inviting. During Reynaud's stay, the small fire had been the only light, with the darkness threatening to swallow all but Master's massive chair. Now, candles and sconces outshone the fire, giving the room's colors warmth and glow. Seline's small chair, and mine, joined Gautier's in friendship. The bouquets added a subtle sweetness to the air and a sense of life. And, waiting in the corner behind a cloth: a painting to make him laugh.

I couldn't sit. I was too excited. Fortunately, Seline had barely reached her chair when he entered the room.

I drew in a breath. He looked... handsome. For a beast. He wore a golden brocade, which drew out the rich, honey-colored hairs from his shadows. His breeches, black velvet. No shoes. I decided, perhaps, shoes were impossible, even for a royal cobbler.

"Beast!" Seline jumped to her feet to sweep a deep curtsy as Gautier bowed. He raised an eyebrow at me, and I giggled and gave a curtsy as well. "We were not expecting you tonight."

He grunted. "Lady Claudette thought you would not mind if I came. I can leave if—"

"Oh no, no." Seline cocked her head at my chair. Curiosity? The emotion passed too quickly for me to read. "You're unexpected, but that does not mean unwelcome. You may come every evening if you wish."

"You are being polite."

"Not at all." She flashed him one of her smiles. "Every night. Here, let me pour you some tea."

"Thank you," he said. He never drank it, but the ritual still created a sense of welcome friendship.

I watched them interact, happiness in my heart. They both had come so far. I could almost imagine life when Seline broke the spell—

Cold slammed into me. *This will all end.* Madame would find a way to throw me in the streets. No matter, Seline being queen. Lady Marguerite would use my part in Seline's coming against me. Nor did I doubt Madame's ability to find other ways to drive me away. She wouldn't rest until I left. Then I'd be forced to wander until I found a position somewhere else, starting at the bottom as a low, lame, floor drudge. Invisible again. Invisible always.

"Lady Claudette mentioned a surprise," Gautier said, breaking my dark thoughts. His eyes centered on my face as no one else's could. "I am most curious as to what it is."

"Pffft. It's not impressive." Seline went to the covered painting in the corner. I helped her position it before his chair. "Claudette and I tried to be artists. Would

you like to see the attempt?"

"I am afraid I do not know much about art," he said. "I will not be able to tell —"

I laughed. "Oh, you'll be able to tell we're quite terrible."

At the same time, Seline said, "Don't expect much. It's more of... an impression of spring. Rather than the real thing. Very fancy and abstract."

The cover fluttered to the floor.

His face twitched. "Spring?"

"You are allowed to laugh," I said. "You know. Hahaha? You won't scare her."

His face continued to twitch. "What are those red and blue blotches?"

"That's Lord Bluebird," Seline said, pointing him out, "and this is Lady Cardinal. They're singing to each other. Claudette made them."

Gautier lost his control. His shoulders shook, and his lips curled away from his teeth. His laughter shifted from suppressed, piggish snorts to something resembling a hiccuping roar. Seline flinched at first, and I cringed, but soon we joined him.

"I can do that well," Gautier finally managed to say.

"We weren't trying very hard," Seline admitted. "Well, I had an exceptional tree, until Claudette put that pathetic bird in it."

He chuckled again as I batted one of Seline's ringlets and protested.

"Claudette says it's a beautiful bird," Gautier said with a smile. I knew his grin was toothy, but I didn't realize *how* toothy until Seline averted her eyes. Maybe, if I got him to smile more often, she'd stop noticing. Now, though, I needed him not to pick up on her discomfort.

"Gautier," I said, "I bet you *can* do as well as we did."

"What?" His smile disappeared. Seline's eyebrows raised with her I'm-interested-and-concentrating stare.

The idea that had begun as a distraction sounded better and better. "You could paint."

"I most certainly could not."

"You could, too," I insisted. "Not tonight. Not wearing that. But tomorrow, maybe, or the evening after. We promise not to do any better than you."

"And what would I paint?"

"You'd paint?" Seline asked, as an eager child might ask for candy.

"No," he said.

"Come on," I said. "It won't be that bad. You could paint a lake in front of a mountain. At nighttime. With no moon."

He gave a gurgling snort. I think he was trying to suppress another laugh.

Seline gave an appraising look at his hands, then at our abysmal painting. "It will be fun. We can compete for worst painting."

"Fine." He folded his arms and leaned back into his chair. "Fine. You can make me embarrass myself."

"Embarrass?" Seline giggled behind a hand. "We let you laugh at us. You cannot do worse than Claudette's birds."

His scowl lessened. "I suppose not."

I grinned. "You're starting to sound as if you're interested, Gautier."

He snorted again, softly. But the edges around his eyes crinkled.

"We're not dressed for it tonight," Seline said as she took her seat. "Well, I don't know about Claudette, but we're not. Though I suppose we could ask for some frocks. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Whenever you wish."

She sighed.

So did I. "You're being difficult."

He jutted out his jaw. "I'm letting you bully me into painting."

"Is she being cheeky?" Seline said. "If you really don't want to—"

"I'll do it. She's just being Claudette." He unfolded his arms. "How would you like to pass the evening?"

Seline stared at my chair, her eyes half-focused and far away. "What does she sound like?"

I'd expected her to simply choose one of our regular activities. Before I could react, Gautier answered, "Her voice is not deep nor high. It is pleasant. She sounds as if she is about to get into mischief. Always. Even when she speaks, her voice holds laughter."

My cheeks prickled with heat. "You cannot talk about me if I'm in the room."

"How old is she?" Seline asked.

One of his knobby eyebrows raised in question.

"Who's bullying who?" I said. When the eyebrow didn't back down, I sighed. Wasn't this what I wanted? To be noticed? "Before the enchantment, I was eighteen. Or nineteen. I'm not sure of my exact age."

"She's eighteen or nineteen."

"As am I." Seline wiggled in her chair. "Tell us what you look like, Claudette."

I got up and shoved a book at her. "We are not discussing how I look."

"She refuses to tell us," Gautier said, with a half smile.

"I gathered," Seline said. She slid the book onto the table between her and Gautier. "Please, Claudette. I'm curious."

Why did it bother me so? I told myself it was the Command. They needed to focus on each other, not me. I aimed my voice at Gautier, who still had that annoying half smile. "You're enjoying this way too much. Ask her to read and leave me alone."

"If I am guessing right, by the location of her voice, she must be about your height, Seline," he said slowly.

"I said stop!" If I were visible, I'd have given him a withering glare. I pressed the book back into Seline's arms.

"We'd better leave her alone," Seline said. "Would you like to read for us tonight?"

Gautier held up his hands.

"That's right. I forgot. I could hold..." Her voice trailed off, and her cheeks turned red.

His brows furrowed in puzzlement, and then he looked away, at the fire. Seline could hold the book for him, but that would mean sitting beside him. Not once had she touched him. The closest she allowed herself was arm's length. The length of one of his arms, not hers.

So close, and yet so far. The Command's weight took me by surprise; it had grown so light. It didn't offer a solution, however. Seline wanted to entertain the beast, to laugh with him. But not to be near him. Certainly not to touch him. I told the Command to be satisfied. If I were her, I would not have gotten past hate.

Poor Gautier. I remembered the pain in his face as he stared at the lion-shaped hedge. Manipulated as a prince. Rejected as a beast. He was trying now, really trying, and she wanted to help him as well. Wasn't that how love began? Concern for others over yourself? But in this moment, love seemed impossible. She could not overcome her fear and embarrassment, even as his human eyes filled with hurt.

"I'll hold it," I found myself saying.

He stirred. "Would you?"

I tugged on the book and Seline released it. Gautier dragged a sofa from along the wall to a position closer to her chair. We both sat. With him in it, the sofa resembled more of a loveseat.

"Can you move over?" I said. "I am skinny, but I am not *that* small."

He grunted and scooted to the side.

"Claudette will turn the pages?" Seline said. Her flush deepened even as relief flooded her face.

"Yes," Gautier said. And then to me, "I need you to hold it here, so I can see."

He shifted his weight so that his body angled toward me, allowing me to get closer. A taloned thumb gently pulled the book over, and I held my weight with my arm so I could lean into him. Sitting this close made me grateful that Seline had not tried. He was *massive*. I did not know how she would have handled it, with him looming not only over the book but over the person holding it. Then there was his heat. A pleasant warmth, I decided, though maybe my enchanted tolerance of temperature helped. Gautier shifted again, placing his arm on the back of the sofa for balance. His forehead furrowed as he did it, and I suppressed a giggle at his unease. After all, I felt the same.

"You'll have to signal to me when to turn," I said.

"Mmm?"

It was best he knew before he sent more notes. "I cannot read."

He jerked, surprised.

"I am sorry for my reaction the other day when you asked if I knew my numbers." My face felt hot, and not entirely from being so close to him. "You were not wrong to ask, nor to assume. Just as nearly all of us know our numbers, we do not know our letters."

"I will nod," he whispered, though a whisper from him was anything but. Seline must have noticed the attempt, for she began to adjust the flowers in the tea table's bouquet. "The note. It was my appreciation for—the other night when—"

"I had a friend read it to me," I said. He shifted his weight, and I fought the urge to fidget as well. "I was worried you were upset with me, and so I—Anyway. You're welcome."

After an awkward pause, he began to read. I let his gravelly voice wash over me. When had it stopped being so abrasive? It matched the tone of the book, the rough texture of the sea. After a page turn, I stole a glance at Seline. She stared into the distance at nothing at all, a slight smile on her lips, eyes glinting. *That's right. After I rescued her from the ledge, she'd mentioned her father had been a sailor.*

She didn't even tell her father goodbye. She covered her pain by teaching me to be a lady-in-waiting, by learning to paint. By entertaining a beast. How long could she go on before homesickness overcame her? If she could resist it for three more weeks, she'd never have to leave her father again.

My elbow ached. Without thinking, I leaned backward. Heat from Gautier's arm pressed against my neck. He stumbled on his sentence, and my spine snapped back to being straight. Seline blinked, coming out of her bittersweet reverie.

He cleared his throat, and as he did so, he lightly tipped his head backward. *Go ahead*, he seemed to tell me.

I held my breath as I took my weight off my arm once more, flexing it. I let my back rest against the sofa, my head against his arm. His heat spread through me. He gave a tiny nod and resumed reading. Within a few minutes I had fully relaxed, Seline's thoughts had returned to a nostalgic place, and his words the rough but beautiful sea.

The clock's chimes made all three of us jump. As conscious thought returned to me, a brief *something* caught my attention. A presence, at the entrance to the room, gone now. I sat forward, about to Sense as far as I could into the hallway, but Seline spoke.

"You read well, Beast. I enjoyed that."

"I could tell." He hesitated. "It is not... too terrible? For you here?"

"I like it here." When he frowned, she gave him one of her best smiles. "I do. There is so much of my old life here. Plus I enjoy your company, and Claudette's."

He closed the book and stared at the cover. "The story reminds you of home."

"Not home," Seline said. Her finger traced the rim of her empty teacup. "It has been many years since we lived by the sea."

Gautier, the prince, knew how to hear what was not said. He pressed her. "But..."

"Her father," I said.

Seline did not need to hear me. She knew what Beast was implying. She nodded; one swift dip of her head.

Gautier closed his eyes. Underneath my neck, the muscles of his arms tightened. I sat forward. He shook his head, and perhaps to both of us he said, "I am sorry."

"No," Seline said. "I forbid you to feel sorry. There is a mystery to this castle, and I know you cannot tell me. But I am glad to be your friend. Both of you, I think, have been alone for a long time."

"Yes," he whispered. By the way he tensed, I knew the curse wouldn't let him say anything further. His eyes found mine, despite the invisibility.

His eyes are so human.

Underneath the teeth and the fur, so was he. I saw something there; something that echoed the loneliness and pride of a lame servant girl. The emotions within his soul caught my breath.

Seline broke the illusion by standing and curtsying. "Truly, Beast, do not worry about me. Sleep well."

The air chilled as I left the sofa. I wanted to stay behind. The vulnerability I'd seen in his eyes, how it connected with mine, left me yearning for something I could not identify. My emotions swirled within me. I knew Gautier held the key to untangling them.

I did not turn back, however. Instead of waiting a respectable distance down the hall, Bertram stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER 21

For the next few days, everything seemed to be going well. Seline laughed and showed no signs of nostalgic tears. Marie pretended to have never seen a note. Gautier visited us every night, sometimes painting or playing cards. The Command's weight was almost nonexistent.

So why did I feel so... unsettled?

Memories from the reading haunted my thoughts. In half-formed flashes, Gautier's heat flowed over me, and I recalled the loneliness in his eyes. Thank goodness he wasn't able to see me. The more superstitious scullery maids, the ones who visited hedge witches for love potions and charms, said that souls mingled when two gazes met. If I was too afraid to look into my own soul, I certainly didn't want him to.

I tried to focus on Seline instead. Find ways to make her happy, both as her friend and as Madame's slave. There were moments when I felt free from the disquiet that nagged me, but it always came back. Could the restlessness really be the Command? Fading in and out?

Seline's becoming easier around him, I realized as I searched for an outfit for her to wear for the day. The two had laughed together the previous night, while all of us shared jokes. She hadn't flinched once at his laughter. *I should feel giddy, I should feel... not whatever it is I'm feeling.*

"What's that?" Seline stepped through my left shoulder and shifted the clothing to better see a brown, though heavily embroidered, skirt. "A split-skirt? Does Beast keep a stable?"

I stood there.

"Of course. Pippa ate and slept somewhere. Do you ride?"

Why did she insist on asking me questions?

"I am sorry," she said as if she guessed my frustration. "I'll ask you through Beast tonight. I haven't ridden in forever. It's so, how to describe it? Freeing."

Freeing. I liked the word. The more freedom she felt while at the castle, the better.

"Ooo, this one!" Seline tugged out a yellow day dress, the perfect shade for her. "This morning, I'm teaching you to embroider. I noticed you never join me with a basket."

I dressed her. After, she set up a scrap of linen for me. I followed her patient instructions, but I soon realized that embroidery was not the same as darning a sock. Darning had a purpose. There was an obvious space that needed stitches, *now*, or you got a blister on your foot.

Embroidery had no edges that needed to be closed. You could sew anywhere, create anything, and the stitches needed to be even because people would see them. Complicated stitches. Over and over again I had to pull out my attempts because I

had no skill and my picture looked terrible.

That was the worst part of embroidery: the picture. The entire purpose was to make a picture to show the world. Seline told me to form it in my mind and try to create it on the fabric...

Except I could not hold the picture in my head because *he* kept creeping in.

Like his grin. Toothy, fierce, so much more than a smile. A rare treasure that he shot me whenever I'd been particularly snarky.

The thread knotted into a disastrous snarl. I hurled the linen across the Rose Suite's sitting room.

Seline set aside her work. Smooth. Calm. "We shouldn't be inside on such a fine day."

"It's fine every day."

"Shall we go on a walk?" she said as she stood. It wasn't a real suggestion.

My embroidery stayed slumped against the wall.

Seline asked me to take her somewhere new, so I tugged her southeast to the hedge maze, right beside the topiaries. I'd spent some time at the maze, avoiding Bertram and flowers, so I knew the solution by heart. Seline exclaimed with delight when she saw it, and I trailed behind her as she dived in.

Partway through, I caught the faintest tinge of cinnamon and musk. I Sensed. There. Gautier, near the center.

It will be good for them to see more of each other, I thought as I began to direct her. Madame's compulsion throbbed half-heartedly at the idea, like an injury almost healed. Because Seline *was* falling in love, little by little? Or was it merely me thinking them closer to love? Or was I getting better at resisting Madame's orders, and that's why it didn't pulse so strongly?

I didn't have time to figure it out. We'd arrived, and I tugged on Seline's skirt.

"Are we going the wrong way?" Seline asked.

"It depends," said Gautier as he rounded the corner. "Are you wanting to go deeper in or find your way out?"

She stepped backward, her arm brushing the hedge wall. She had never seen Beast in full sunlight before. Candlelight favored him, blending his edges into shadows. Sunlight exposed him for what he was. It showed the textures of his fur, the leather of his nose and hand pads. His two silver horns glinted. He wore a white linen shirt and black breeches, a bit more ragged than how she had seen him lately. No cloak. I realized that while his capes and waistcoats made him look larger, they hid the fact that overall he still retained a man's shape. A bulky, muscular shape, but still reminiscent of a man.

Seline recovered and gave him a smile. "You enjoy the outdoors? The weather is so lovely, it's a shame to stay inside."

If Sibyla had cursed us in the winter! Ugh. Perpetual snow.

She continued. "I nearly drove Claudette mad by teaching her to embroider."

His mouth twitched, and he tilted his head toward me where I stood beside her.

"I don't have any skill for it," I said. "Nor patience."

"She is that bad?" he asked Seline.

"We'll never know. She threw her piece across the room, so another attempt is unlikely."

I plucked a leaf from the wall. Once more they talked about me instead of themselves. They should go off together—at the half-formed idea, the remains of the compulsion jabbed at me stronger than I expected. Strong enough that disobedience risked the Command attacking me. Thus, with little enthusiasm, I waved the leaf toward the exit. "Why don't I return? You know the grounds better

than I do. I bet you even know the names of some of the plants.”

He ignored me and continued talking to Seline. “As I have been telling you, she has a temper.”

She eyed the leaf, which was waving with more *oomph*. “It’s rather adorable.”

“Adorable?” I said. I dropped the leaf. “You know, I can just leave.”

His head jerked toward me, but Seline spoke before he could. “Do you keep a stable?”

“Stable?” he said. He kept his eyes on me, a wordless insistence to stay put. “I do, but horses do not like me.”

“Do you think I could go riding?”

“Absolutely.”

She turned to where I had dropped the leaf on the ground. “Claudette, can you ride?”

I said no, and he relayed the answer.

“Oh.” Her face fell, then brightened. “I can go riding during Claudette’s afternoons.”

“If you wish,” he said, “I will Summon a stablehand for you now. Lady Claudette does not mind.”

“Excuse me?” I said. My chest grew heavier, as if Madame sat on it. “You cannot ride with her and—”

“Thank you!” Seline said to me. “I’ll think of you when I’m finished.” She glanced at her clothes. “Not quite a riding skirt, but I can do sidesaddle. There are sidesaddles?”

“Of course,” he said. He took a massive step backward, leaving a space between him and us. His back rustled the hedge. “Stay still. I will Summon a stablehand.”

Seline’s eyebrows rose. “You mean, you can just magic someone here?”

He didn’t answer but frowned at the empty space. A *whoosh* of air fluttered Seline’s hair and skirt. Grass crunched and popped back into place as some poor person tottered about. Gautier gave the man some instructions, and the servant snapped a tiny branch from the maze wall and motioned for Seline to follow.

I stamped my foot as she disappeared around the corner. “What are you—why didn’t you—”

“She wants to ride,” Gautier said.

“But the two of you—”

“You wanted me to be her friend.”

“I do! And yet—” I could barely breathe. Why did I feel the Command so strongly right now? “Can you not lift Madame’s Command?”

He looked at the tuft of ground at his feet, then at me. “No. I wish to, but I cannot. Look at it this way. Although I am passing up an opportunity to be with her, I am giving Seline something she desires. This sacrifice will make Seline more favorable toward me. More so than a mere walk.”

The pressure evaporated. I gave a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“I’ve had practice with deceiving the enchantment. You are at your leisure now?”

I shrugged. “I could always try my hand at embroidery again.”

He smiled. “If my company is preferable to tossing fabric about the room, and you don’t mind a long walk, I can show you the swan pond.” He took a step toward the maze’s exit, then paused. “The swans will fly away the moment I am near, but the water is still peaceful.”

At his words, I realized that there had been birdsong when Seline and I had entered the maze. No longer. No rabbits, no squirrels. Not even butterflies.

The loneliness of his life struck me again. I'd been cruel, with my assumptions about his privilege. Cruel and ignorant.

We left the maze and followed one of the many gravel paths. He kept to the grass, to give me room, and made little noise for something so big. We continued that way for many long minutes, in silence and companionship. Hedges gave way to flowerbeds: at first, artfully designed, and then more wild and untended. As the colors of perpetual spring bloomed around us, a sort of peace settled into my bones. I'd never felt peace before.

"Claudette, what do you look like?"

He only calls me 'lady' when he's around others. But then, I was not a lady. "Nothing special."

He stepped over a cluster of tulips. "I am curious. Did I ever see you before—"

"No. The Lady of the Keys assigned me to rarely used rooms. I was to clean them when there was little chance of people seeing me."

"Because of your limp."

The blood drained from my face, and the gravel crunched as I halted. "Who told you about my leg?"

He halted, hands clasped behind his back. "No one. I can hear it when you walk. Not always."

"I often forget to hide it, now that I'm invisible," I said softly.

"I am sorry. I didn't know it distressed you."

"It shouldn't," I said. I scuffed the gravel with my bad leg. "It's been that way since birth. My left leg is about two finger-widths shorter than my right. Thus my name. 'Little lame one.'" *Thus my parents didn't want me.* "I'm a bit, um, overambitious to prove myself. It makes me walk funny, so I try to hide it."

"Don't," he said, and there was a bit of a growl in his undertone. "There is nothing wrong with you. I once cared about appearances, but being turned into a beast changed my perspective."

"I'm sure it did," I said with a smile.

He grinned, and we resumed walking. The path left flowerbeds behind, and we entered an orchard of apples and pears, both in season under the curse. The leaves created dappled shadows in his fur. I rather liked the effect. He spoiled it by bringing up my appearance again. "So one leg is shorter. What else?"

I rolled my eyes. "I have blonde hair."

"So does half the kingdom."

"Well, you know which half I look like. Don't ask about eyes, because I do not know." He blinked in surprise, and I explained. "I haven't seen myself in a mirror in a long time. Servants don't own them, and there aren't any in the rooms I clean. My reflection in the piano is rather brown."

"Right. I keep forgetting."

"That I'm a servant?"

"Yes." His face clouded over. It made me think of Marie and her objections to our friendship.

"Should I leave?" I asked, sounding defensive. I was defensive.

"No." He practically spat the word. "No, I want you here."

"I don't understand your facial expressions," I said, frustrated I couldn't figure out why he grimaced like that.

"I cannot see yours."

Good point. My stomach growled. Usually Seline and I ate a light dinner about now. I jumped and snatched an apple off a tree, handing it to him.

"I don't eat... neatly," he said.

"I won't watch." I grabbed one for myself and ignored the noises he made as he ate. "What about you? There were no portraits of you in the rooms I cleaned. What do you look like?"

"A head taller than I think you are, medium build. My hair is—" The grass stopped rustling, so I turned. The apple had disappeared, and he was fumbling his sleeve up his arm. "That color."

The claw pointed to a swath of honey-colored hair. "Ah," I said. "So you looked like the other half of the kingdom."

He chuckled. "Yes. And my eyes... I got to keep my eyes."

"I know. They are too human." He closed them. Pain flashed over his face; a pain I identified as mourning, for the humanity he once had. I placed my hand on the soft fur of his arm. He opened his eyes as I squeezed. "I like them. They're a breathtaking blue."

He swallowed, eyes on my invisible hand. "Thank you."

Gautier slipped his other hand over mine as we crested the hill. The orchard abruptly ended. In the little valley before us glimmered a pond nearly the same shade as his eyes. A small island seemed to float in the center, anchored by a delicate white bridge. There wasn't a swan in sight. The wind came from behind us, carrying his cinnamon and musk to the pond in warning. Yet another beautiful place ruined, in a way, by him.

"What happened?" I asked. The breeze took my words and turned them into a sigh. "Back then?"

Gautier gently tugged me down the hill to a stone bench before the water. I sat, but he crouched beside it. He was too large to sit with me.

"I didn't marry," he said.

"So Sibyla cursed the castle?"

"It was more than that." He gazed at the water, but I knew he didn't see it. He saw the past. "I used to be... a difficult person. I was unhappy. Very unhappy. What worried my father the most was that I turned down every bride he found for me. You will need an heir, he said. Any woman will do, he said. Finally, he requested a boon from the fairy Sibyla. Her price was half the kingdom, because the woman she offered was her half-mortal daughter."

I sucked in air through my teeth. "You refused her?"

A flash of smugness appeared in the folds of his forehead. "No one at this castle, including me, Lord Antoine, and Lady Marguerite, wanted the kingdom mired in fairy politics. I rather think Sibyla began to regret her offer in the end, anyway. Her daughter cared for me as little as I did her. But my stubborn refusal offended her. I was not, ah, kind. With my words."

I could only imagine. *Thank you, Sibyla, for condemning we lower servants who knew nothing.* "Thus the curse on the entire castle."

"She gave me a century," he said, and he gave a short bark of bitter laughter. "Except to me, it would be ten years. She cursed the woods, to lessen the chance of any woman finding the castle. And she made me look like this, so all women would know with a glance what type of man they spoke to."

I didn't know what to say. 'I'm sorry' didn't seem appropriate.

"She also compelled me to ask for the hand of any woman I dined with. That is why I do not share meals with Seline. It would horrify her, for one thing, and her saying yes would not necessarily break the spell."

It had not with Lady Lucrece. I bit my lip, wondering if I dared to ask the question that had lurked for nearly ten years. Wondering if he would dare to answer. "Gautier... If Seline... That is, if the curse does not break..."

Those human, human eyes. They flashed despair.

I prompted. "Lady Marguerite believes we will stay this way forever."

"I have allowed her to believe what she wishes. She does not know, however, what Sibyla said. No one was in the garden with us when she cursed me." He bowed his head, his body as rigid as the stone I sat upon.

For a moment, I feared he'd lash out in one of his rages. The swans knew too well the danger of staying near him. I was no swan. I understood.

I nudged his unyielding shoulder. "Do you need to shatter the bench? I won't judge. After all, I hurled my embroidery across the room, for no decent reason. Though I must say, the stone may hurt your fist."

His eyes popped open. "You would not joke if you knew her words."

"Likely not," I said. I allowed a smile into my voice. "But you seem less angry now."

Gautier shook his head, and his horns flashed in the sunlight. "I do not see how you... I will tell you. I'll tell you what she said."

Cold prickled over my skin as he recited words he had clearly repeated over and over in his mind. Over and over, until they had made him a beast.

"In a century," he said, devoid of emotion, "the twin blooms will wither. If you do not find a wife before their last spark of life trickles away, the castle will crumble, your neighbors will devour your kingdom. And you? You and your servants will die."

Die.

I swallowed. Hard. "That's... that's worse than staying invisible."

Gautier said nothing.

I jumped to my feet. The sun, usually so warm and inviting, glared off the water and I couldn't even shield my eyes. I turned my back on it, kneeling before him, and put my hands on the paw that gripped his knee. "In good news, we still have time."

Less than three weeks, but time was still time.

"But no hope," he said to our hands.

"None?" I said with a scoff that wobbled in its playfulness. "Seline's not unhappy. She just misses her father. She likes you as a friend, at least, so her feelings may develop further."

"It is not that simple." His voice rumbled, and once more I couldn't read his face. "The curse's end is not the only thing Lady Marguerite has wrong."

I frowned, and guessed. "Seline doesn't have to love you?"

"She does have to love me. I'm supposed to marry for love." He took a deep breath as he looked away. "But, I fear, I'm supposed to love her, too."

My chest tightened. "You don't like her?"

He grimaced, showing his too-many teeth. "She's kind. Pretty. Intelligent. You were completely right when you said we would be great friends."

"... but not lovers."

"Aside from the spell's compulsion to try, I have no desire to propose to her." He shook my hands off his and stood, turning away from me. "She does not love me. Even if I am wrong and my feelings don't matter, it will not work."

"Feelings change. A month ago, you would have snapped at me for daring to speak to you."

"True." He still faced the hill we'd walked down. "My feelings this time will not change."

"You stick out your jaw when you're being stubborn," I said, forcing myself to stay light. "Are you doing that right now?"

Gautier twisted, looking straight at my face. His eyes uselessly searched for mine. "Claudette, why do you make fun of me?"

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to—"

"No, I'm not angry." He shook his hands in frustration. "I wish to know. Why do you tease me so often?"

"I don't know. I often joke to hide my feelings, or when I feel threatened."

His eyes narrowed. "I threaten you?"

"Okay, *that* expression would have scared me before. But not now." I studied his features, desperate to figure out what he was thinking. "I always make light of things. But for you... You're fun to tease. You need to smile more. Show off your pearly teeth."

He grunted.

"I can't interpret half the sounds you make. Don't feel left out. Besides, what does this have to do with anything? One minute we're talking about death and love, and the next you're asking me why I'm—what's the word you always use? Impertinent."

"I like it."

"What?"

"I like your impertinence," he said, looking at the ground. "A lot. You treat me like a person. Not a beast. Not a prince. A person. You always have."

"Oh," I said, and I blushed.

"I think that's why. Why I'm—"

"Stop," I said.

"I need to tell—"

"*Hush*. It's Seline." I pressed my hands to my navel. "Something's wrong. She's tugging. I *know* it's her tug. But it's not gentle. She's panicking."

Gautier lowered to a half crouch, facing the hill, as if he might spring into a run. "Is she hurt?"

"How would I know? I didn't make this summoning thing." I tried to stay calm as the tugging grew half-crazed. "We need to go."

The tug grabbed my stomach and lurched me off my feet.

I no longer stood by Gautier.

I stood before a hysterical Seline.

CHAPTER 22

Seline swung a candelabra in front of her as she pressed herself to the wall. I staggered, trying to regain my balance after being whisked from the gardens. We stood in the hallway outside her rooms, and at first Sense, I thought the hall empty.

It should not have been empty.

“Claudette! Claudette!” Seline jerked the candelabra, eyes wild. “Beast! Someone!”

I dodged the candelabra and tugged twice on her braid.

She dissolved into tears. “There’s a—there’s a something. In the room. I came inside, to—it threw a shoe at me! I cannot see it.”

An invisible something meant an invisible servant. How could anyone even imagine attacking Seline? I grabbed the candelabra and lowered it, preventing her from swinging it again.

“Will you look?”

I made the candelabra nod.

“But, no! Don’t leave me! If it comes out, I won’t see it, and what if it’s—here, take my handkerchief.” She fumbled in her skirt pocket. “Wave this if it’s you. Otherwise I will swing the moment the door opens. I will scream, yes, I will scream if something happens out here. Oh, where is Beast?”

Beast couldn’t teleport across the castle. I took the handkerchief, gathered my anger like a shield, and went into her chambers.

The sitting room did not look amiss. I Sensed and found no one. A figurine of a girl dressed for a ball lay on the carpet, broken in half. That was all. I grabbed her head and held the jagged part in front of me. Then I reconsidered. If I held anything, the intruder would see me, and they would have the advantage. If they Sensed me, they wouldn’t know exactly where I stood. Only Gautier knew us with accuracy. I set the broken figurine down and slipped Seline’s handkerchief in my pocket.

Faint noises came from behind the bedroom door. I pressed my palm to the wood. If I opened it slowly, quietly, the person might not notice me. Unless there was more than one person. I took a deep breath, eased the door open, and slipped inside.

Wind fluttered the remains of curtains. Tufts of feathers puffed from slashes in the coverlet. The evening dress we had laid out earlier pooled on the ground, mottled with ink. The small breakfast table stood on its side, one leg splintered off. I marked it as a possible weapon. Beside it lay the shoe, or the remnants of it. The toe had been ripped off so that only a heel remained.

The sounds came from the dressing room, where dress after dress flew from the wardrobe. An old, rusting dagger tore the luxurious fabrics.

Laughter, a female's laughter, gasped and hiccuped with each slash. I Sensed. Her presence tickled the back of my mind, but I couldn't place her.

"Put the dagger down," I said. I did not know my own voice. Deep and threatening, like Gautier's growl. I frightened myself.

A strip of velvet fell to the floor. "Ah, she comes."

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

"You thought you could succeed? You're wrong. You're wrong, you're wrong, and we're all going to *die*." The dress snapped to the floor, leaving only the dagger to mark her.

"And this is helping? Terrifying Seline? If you hurt her—"

"I'm saving her! He won't ask her to dinner. He won't ask, and the fairy will return, and she will destroy us all." The dagger snaked through the air and smashed a pot of face powder.

Her crazy way of speaking helped identify her.

Lady Alys.

Lady Alys, who had slapped Lady Catin over and over in desperation to wake her. Sympathy for Madame's former tool softened my anger. A little.

"Alys, I'm not sure what you're trying to do, but this is not helping." I slipped from the bedroom to the dressing room, keeping my eye on the dagger. If I grabbed a shredded dress, could I tackle and restrain her? "You're risking us all by frightening her. What if she runs away?"

Alys threw a vial of perfume at me, missing by a good three feet. It shattered against the wall and glass flew everywhere. I froze.

A giggle. "The gate is locked. She'll be frightened, and he will care. I won't fail. Not this time."

Could I reason with her? "It's not your fault that Lucrece did not break the spell."

"He did not even try! I was there. He asked, but he didn't care!" The dagger wobbled. "This one, she said he likes this one, but he *must* ask her and he *won't*!"

"I don't see how frightening Seline..." I fell silent. A terrified Seline would cling to Beast—she could see him, he had power here. To stay always close, she'd need to dine with him. That would trigger the compulsion to propose. It wasn't a crazy plan, at all.

Except he didn't love her and, though she cared for the beast, Seline did not love him, either.

"A proposal won't work," I said. "Not yet. Put down the dagger." I moved toward her, trying not to step on glass and give away my position.

"No! I will not let you kill us!" A hand glass sailed in my direction, too close. It hit a vase behind me, in Seline's bedroom. "She told me you distract him and he doesn't listen and now he won't see her and it's not going to work." She began to sob and laugh simultaneously.

"Who told you—" I didn't quite understand that part. "What?"

"I watch him in the garden," she said. Lady Alys's chair in the South Hall overlooked the shrubbery and, in the distance, the hedge maze. Pieces began to click into place. "He speaks to no one but you."

"You don't know it's me. You can't Sense that far." Another step, long and to the side, between ruined hats and gloves.

"She says it's you. He walks the gardens, every day, looking for you."

She says. Madame?

Another, quieter thought. *He goes every day?*

She threw a brush at my head, close enough to ruffle my hair. "Stay still!"

Almost there. I took another lunging step, wondering how much longer until Gautier arrived. If Alys were a guttersnipe, I'd punch her and she'd come to her senses and we'd have a drink. Unfortunately, Alys had no senses, so I hoped he would appear to subdue her. As a beast, he could shake off a dagger wound more easily than I could.

As I mulled over that, the broken powder pot exploded forward; Alys had swiped it with her hand. Powder and pottery shards flew toward me, impossible to dodge. Whiteness dusted my skirt before it turned invisible.

Alys gave a battle cry worthy of any drudge and surged forward. I dove just in time to avoid the dagger. She lunged again, the blade slicing my skirt as I rolled. I scrambled to my feet, brushing glass off my sleeves, and cursed; the unconscious gesture had puffed dust visible again, exposing my position. The dagger advanced.

"Gautier will be here any moment!" I leaped backward, into the heavy wooden wardrobe. My rump *thumped* onto the wardrobe's floor, audible to another of the castle. "He'll maul you. You know his temper!"

She giggled. *Giggled*. "I'll run away. Hide. He'll keep her close. Because I may attack and—and—if he won't dine with her I'll poison her. Yes. Then she has to eat with him to be safe. He'll ask."

Sibyla had made the wrong person a beast. Gautier had a temper, but he'd never poison someone in order to end the spell.

I snatched a dress as I sprang to my feet, and dropped it as the dagger shifted. My best hope was to tackle her with my bare hands. I circled, grateful for Seline's enormous dressing room, grateful for Alys's slowness. The dagger swayed as if she were drunk. Was her body to the left of the weapon, or the right? I paused, tense, watching it as if I were a viper.

Finally, her voice tottered in the silence. "Where are you?"

To the right. My eyes narrowed with concentration and I flung myself at her.

We flew backward into the dressing stool, which struck her somewhere in the back. Her breath whooshed out near my ear. I kept my eye on the dagger, my hand wrapped around the fist that gripped the hilt. Her free hand found my hair. She yanked my head backward and I gave an angry yell, and we tumbled over. She lay on top of me now. I kicked with my legs but my skirts tangled them.

"You won't stop me!" she shrieked. Her grip on my hair tightened and she slammed my head into the thin rug. I blinked and groped with my right hand, feeling her nostrils. I pushed her away. She bit my palm and I snatched my hand back. She twisted on top of me, her hand loosening on my hair.

He burst through the bedroom door, snarling and on all fours. Behind him, still wielding her candelabra, stood Seline. Gautier's head whipped about as he scanned the room, his eyes settling on the open door to the dressing room. His gaze locked on our broken stool, on the grunts and hisses we made. He bounded across the bedroom in two jumps.

It distracted me. As soon as I heard the door, I had taken my eyes off the dagger. I saw him, and my heart filled with joy and relief. Pain shot through my wrist, my fingers opened wide, and warm metal left my palm. Alys's invisible hand shoved my cheek as her other hand plunged the dagger into my middle.

Gautier stopped short as I cried out. His face twisted in rage, and his hands formed fists. He knew precisely where we lay, but we were still invisible to him, and he couldn't pull her off without potentially hurting me. The pain took my breath and I couldn't scream to him that I was already wounded. Lady Alys twisted the dagger in my gut, and I cried out again. The room's edges darkened, but I fought the faint. She left the blade in my middle as she tried to dart past him.

His mouth twisted and exposed teeth as he lunged after her. Lady Alys had no chance. He swept the air with his claws. The dresser shuddered with her impact, and he leaped upon her. I heard her screaming as Gautier pinned her to the ground, slashing at her again: once, twice. On the third pass he gained control of himself, balling his bloody fist. The air tightened, and three presences appeared in the room.

"Guards, restrain her!" Gautier said. I heard them tottering on their feet, disoriented. "Now!"

There was scuffling, and grunts of communication, and Gautier guided the guards to solid handholds before getting up. Lady Alys wailed and sobbed, but I didn't hear struggling. "Lock her in the dungeon," said Gautier, still shaking with rage, "and post a guard."

"Beast, what is she?" Seline dared to peek into the room. "Is it safe?"

"Stand to the side..." Gautier faltered as the guards marched Alys straight through Seline, for she'd dropped the candelabra. "Never mind. It is safe."

She rushed to his side, her eyes scanning the room. "Claudette? Where is my Claudette? Oh my God, there's blood."

Gautier opened his bloody fist, and the fury drained from his face. "I lost my temper."

"No, on the floor." She rushed two steps forward, then hung back. Her body trembled. "Claudette, is that you?"

I fumbled with my skirts. I kept one hand clutched to the dagger, the weapon invisible now that it was mostly inside me. My other hand pulled her handkerchief free and tossed it to the ground just as Gautier said in a hollow voice that yes, it was me.

"The pool's getting bigger." Seline fell to her knees and held out her hands. They passed through me. "We have to do something! Can you touch her?"

"I dare not," he said. "I don't know where she's hurt. I'm summoning my physician." The air tightened again. Both the physician and the apothecary appeared. Glass crunched as Gautier lowered to his knees, his eyes frantic. "Claudette, can you hear us? Where are you hurt?"

"Stabbed." I barely heard myself. Waves of pain washed over me and made my vision fade in and out. "Stomach."

"Your Highness," I heard the physician say. "Please ask the lady to stand aside. My tools will bump into her even as I do not. You, as well."

"Seline, come here," Gautier said. "They need to get to her."

She scooted away from me, not taking her eyes from the blood, soaking the rose-colored rug scarlet. "What is wrong? What was that thing that attacked us?"

I heard him hushing her, muttering something, but the physician's voice was closer and more commanding. The handkerchief danced in the air above me. "I need your assistance. Take this and bring it to the wound."

It took two tries to grab it. I brought the handkerchief and the physician's hand to the dagger. Light touches feathered against the fabric of my dress. He felt where the blade had slid into my flesh and I groaned.

Gautier went rigid, and Seline clutched his arm at his reaction. *She touched him.* The thought swirled around me like dye in water.

"Beast, tell me. Tell me what's happening."

"I can't see. I can only hear." His voice sounded harsher than normal. Rougher. "Lord Cyril, tell me what is going on."

"Highness, the lady appears to have been stabbed two finger-widths below the sternum and to the left." It sounded so sterile, the way the physician said it. *I'm stabbed. I'm having tea. You know, I think I'm beginning to like tea.* "I am about to

remove the weapon. I fear it severed a moderately sized vessel, so there will be more blood. She will be weak for some time. My dear, can you let go of the blade? Laurence, go be useful and mix something for her pain.”

His fingers pried mine loose. I gasped as the metal slid from my body, but still I struggled to stay awake. I needed to tell Seline not to worry. Charles the butcher had tried stabbing himself in the head again recently, and he hadn’t died.

Blood flowed over my hand, as a cloth fumbled against the wound.

“Beast...” Seline’s voice trembled.

From far away, I was aware. I saw Seline turn to Beast, wrapping her arms around his arm, his sleeve still rolled up from when he had shown me the color of his hair. She pressed her face into his shoulder and sobbed. I thought I should be happy about this.

I was not.

I didn’t know *what* I was, except in pain and not happy. Beast touched his clean hand to her hair.

“She won’t die,” he said.

“Yes, she will. Do you see the dagger? There’s so much blood.”

“She cannot die. None of us can.” His eyes fell on the pool of blood. “Not yet.”

“My dear, can you drink this?” A cup hovered in my blurry vision.

I drank it, and I passed out as the jangle of keys entered the room.

CHAPTER 23

I think the pacing woke me. Seline did not pace quietly. She humphed and sighed and stamped her feet. My eyes blinked once, twice, trying to clear. I felt slow. Thick.

“Seline?” I rubbed my leathery tongue against the roof of my mouth. “Gautier?”

“Master.” A soft voice, chiding.

“Marie?”

“I’m here, in the seat beside you.” Her voice rolled over me like dried leaves. “You’re going to be fine.”

“I’m so heavy.” Dully, as if from far away, my middle ached.

“The apothecary has drugged you. The physician managed to sew your wound while you were unconscious, but he said the broken vessel will take time to heal. Something about blood.”

“Tell her I’m awake.”

Seline stopped pacing when a handkerchief waved in her direction. She rushed to the bed, patting the coverlet above where I lay. “She’s awake?”

I winced. “Make her stop.”

Seline’s hand jerked to the side. She paled when she realized where she had patted. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think. I’m so relieved you’re awake. Beast tells me you’ll be fine but—I need to Summon him. He said to Summon him.” She scrunched up her face with thought.

Gautier... wasn’t here. I cleared my throat. “Lady Alys?”

“In the dungeon,” Marie said.

I blinked again, my lids heavy as the drapes in the Rose Suite. As the world focused, I realized there was a light green canopy above my bed. My bed didn’t usually have a canopy. I glanced downward. A floral quilt covered my body, not a fluffy coverlet, and the room was smaller and lighter in color. Candlelight made the whites into yellows, but mostly there was a greenish theme.

“Where am I?” I asked.

“It will take time for us to repair the Rose Suite,” said Marie. “Your chambers were worse than Seline’s. We have you in the Lily Suite for now.”

“I think he’s coming,” Seline said, forehead relaxing.

A quick inhale from Marie. “I better go.”

First, no Gautier, and now Marie was leaving me. “Stay!”

My voice sounded like a hurt child’s. Marie squeezed my hand as she spoke. “I am sorry, but I *must* leave.”

Then she was gone.

Seline began to pace the room. “I wish I could hold your hand or something. Anything. I don’t understand why she attacked you. Beast said she’s insane. He didn’t know she was violent. He’s very upset.”

He entered the room. Either he had run, or he had hovered nearby. Seline told him with anxious happiness that I'd woken.

"You forgot to bow," I said, trying my best to put a smile into my words. "I'll never turn you into a gentleman."

He grunted, and his smile was soft despite the fangs. "You'll never be a lady."

"Is she being impertinent?" Seline asked.

"Yes."

She laughed as she blotted her eyes with a handkerchief. "Well, ask her. How is she feeling?"

He eased toward the bed as if the slightest tremble caused by his steps might reopen my wound. Seline sat, and he knelt; the two of them took up most of the extra space in the room.

"I am glad you've come," I said to him.

"Beast," Seline said, "can she talk? How is she?"

"The drugs are good," I said. "Tell her I'm not in much pain."

He did, and she visibly relaxed, although there were circles under her eyes. The room was dark except for tapers nearly burned to nubs. Seline may cry prettily, but she could not stay up all night and escape unscathed.

"We will have to come up with things for you to do," she told me. "You're going to be in bed for a while. What kind of books do you like?"

"She cannot read," Gautier said.

"Oh." Seline's chin trembled at this devastating news. Then she brightened. "I will have to read to you. I will be *your* lady-in-waiting."

"How long am I a prisoner here?"

"A week or two," Gautier said. "Your body lost a lot of blood. Lord Cyril said the wound was deep, and the severed vessel cannot heal itself quickly, even in the current circumstances."

"*A week or two*," I said. The calendar, always in my mind. One week. Two. Plus a few days. They'd fall in love without me. If they fell in love at all.

Then I remembered Seline gripping his arm for comfort, his hand on her hair. Never had they touched before that. I winced, and the pain flared.

Gautier's brows lowered. "What is wrong?"

I must have cried out. "Nothing. I tried to move."

"Don't," he growled. He told Seline that I was stupid and had tried to move.

Tension seeped over the three of us. I wanted to tell him what happened with Lady Alys, but I knew he'd be unable to restrain his emotions in front of Seline. She clenched and unclenched her fist, making motions like she wished she could hold my hand. Gautier simply knelt there, an unreadable gargoyle.

Seline jumped to her feet. "I'm not very good with patients. That's Estelle's strength. She can sit and be calm and soothing, but I—I cannot even touch you."

She burst into tears once more, and Gautier reached out to her. For the second time, I saw her cry on his shoulder. There was no awkwardness in him this time as he held her. My wound flared again, but I kept my lips pressed together.

"You're tired," Gautier said. "You need sleep. When you wake, Claudette will need entertainment. She'd love for you to read to her."

I hadn't said that, but it had the effect we both wanted. Seline hiccuped and nodded. "Can you touch her? Can you hold her hand?" It seemed so important to her.

He nodded. "I will."

She managed a smile and told me goodbye.

"You haven't slept, either," I said as she left. "Your fur's all ruffled."

He smoothed it. "I don't need as much sleep. Unless you're trying to tell me to leave."

"No. Please don't."

"Then you were teasing me again." He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "What happened?"

I told him about Lady Alys's plan, and he grew more and more rigid as I spoke. I did not mention her plot to poison Seline, because I knew he stood at the edge of one of his rages already. I merely stated Alys's hope to force them to dine together.

"And if I dine with Seline..." He stared at the wall, and I heard the carpet tearing. "She meddles. Like Lady Marguerite."

Madame may be the one who caused this. I did not know for sure. Anyone could have told Lady Alys that I spent time with Gautier. A half-formed suspicion nagged at me, but I couldn't expend the energy to fully form it. *Madame must be thrilled that Alys stabbed me.*

"Alys is locked up?" I said. I did not want to accuse Madame until I knew. I'd prefer to punch her myself.

"She's secure. I tried to put her to sleep, but her madness interferes. A guard will stay beside her, one ordered by myself, and someone will always be near Seline, so she will not be afraid."

"She touched you!" I didn't mean to say it. Except... I should have wanted to say it. With glee. Instead, it sounded like an accusation.

"Yes." His anger faded and his eyes closed. "She's upset and concerned about you. She thinks you offended another servant, that the attack wasn't directed toward her. It seems I am no longer frightening to her. She keeps thanking me for saving you." His eyes flickered to my pillow. "You do not have permission to thank me. You were hurt."

"I will live."

"For a few weeks. No longer." His face flashed frustration and despair.

The enchantment will end. Then we will die.

The candle barely lit anything. Though the enchantment let me see, the shadows still tried to consume the muted colors. I swallowed. "You told Seline you'd comfort me. You'd hold my hand."

"Do you want me to?" His deeply blue, deeply human eyes watched me without seeing. "Or is it to please Seline?"

Had the dagger also pierced my chest? It was difficult to breathe. It was like being under a Command, only worse, because it suffocated me from the inside. "For me."

Gautier's massive hand uncurled and rested on the bed. Instead of a palm he had a large, roundish pad like a dog or cat, and pads lined each of his long fingers. I managed the strength to slide my hand onto his. He closed his fingers, the fur tickling and the leather warm and rough.

I let out a breath I did not know I had been holding. His hand tightened around mine.

"You should sleep," he said. Velvet and gravel. "Heal. I will not let you die."

CHAPTER 24

I woke alone. No, not alone; Marie sat in the corner. I could tell it was her without Sensing. Her feet rhythmically scuffed the floor, a habit of hers when she fretted. I wouldn't be surprised if she had worn out a pair of shoes while waiting for Hugh to notice her.

"Are you worried that Hugh will never propose?" I asked.

The scuffing stopped. "I'm not worried about anything."

"You're a terrible liar."

Hesitation. "I'm concerned. About you."

"I'm not going to die." I frowned. "I'm hungry."

"You haven't eaten anything for days. I'll ring the kitchens." Footsteps out the door, likely to Seline's bedroom or the sitting room, if the Lily Suite had one. Marie returned within a few breaths.

My head felt clearer, so I looked around. Fresh candles; the only thing that had changed. "Where is everyone?"

"Painting, I think."

I felt a stab of pain, not in my middle. *They are allowed to enjoy themselves without me*, I scolded myself, and waited for the pressure from Madame's Command to lift at this good news of them together. Instead, my eyes stung.

"Master held your hand," Marie said.

Her voice took my attention from the strangeness I felt. At least I knew now what bothered her. My hand still tingled with the ghost of his warmth. "Seline asked him to. How do you know?"

"He was still holding it when I returned. You were asleep. Do you..." Her breath rattled. "Do you care for him?"

"He's my friend. I told you that."

"Do you care for him like I care for Hugh?" My heart beat faster at her question, and her hand smacked half against my mouth and half against my cheek. "No! Don't answer that. Don't tell me."

A faint knock. Marie scurried away and returned with some porridge. "Are you able to eat this yourself? You'll be a mess if I have to feed you."

"I will manage."

With utmost care, Marie helped me to sit and plumped my pillows so I'd be as comfortable as possible. My middle blazed. It took forever for it to dull enough for me to pick up a spoon. Slow bites. Painful. The spoon shook.

Marie stayed silent, her foot occasionally escaping to scuff before it stilled. Something was wrong. Marie never acted this agitated, and I didn't know if I could attribute it all to her worrying about me. The question she'd asked, about me caring for—

"No more notes?" she said out of nowhere. Her voice was light, almost shrill.

“... No.”

She took a deep breath. “After I read it, you said there were people you did not trust.” My spoon clinked in the bowl. “You can trust Master.” Each word had a slight pause before the next. Deliberate. “You can trust Seline.”

She didn’t mention the one person I had trusted. My appetite went away. “Madame got to you.”

She said nothing.

“You cannot speak of it.”

“You’ve always been the clever one.” A glass of water floated over to me.

What had she Commanded Marie? Certainly Madame had been the one to tell Lady Alys that Gautier spent time with me, and she’d told her in a way to inflame her insanity. What was Madame doing?

“What can you tell me?” I said.

Feet scuffling. “She’s happy about this.”

I knew she meant my injury, by the way ‘this’ seemed to sicken her. I resumed eating, if only to spite Madame and heal faster. “Of course she is.”

Silence, except for more scuffling as Marie pondered. I gave her time. Finally... “She’s thrilled about what happened because of Lady Alys’s attack. Master and Seline seem closer, now.”

The attack.

Seline clutching him, crying. His hand on her hair. Madame must have entered at that moment. Then he’d invited Seline into his arms, once I’d woken, and she’d gone willingly... Who knew what other times they’d touched? My throat constricted. “Closer? Are they?”

“I don’t know,” Marie said. “Bertram watches them.”

“I knew it.” First Robert, then Bertram. I had such winning suitors.

“No.” Her hand pressed against the bed. “You’re right, but you’re wrong. Bertram likes you, honestly. He brought you flowers.”

“Oh? I don’t see them.”

“Master shoved them under the bed.”

I choked back a laugh. I tended to laugh from my belly, and my belly did not need the exercise. *Gautier knows Bertram’s a fool, then.* “I’m surprised Gautier didn’t toss the flowers out the window.”

“Claudette, don’t forget what I cannot say.”

My lips thinned. Everything I said may get back to Madame. “You’re still my friend, even if I cannot talk to you.”

“Oh, Claudette!” Her body thumped into the mattress as she sobbed. I set my empty bowl on the tray and pushed it away. I concentrated. Whatever drugs they had slipped me earlier had mostly worn off, but it still took a lot of effort to think past the pain and touch Marie’s back. If Seline needed me to touch her anytime soon, it’d be impossible.

I’ll ruin her, Marie.

I’d tell Gautier. He disliked Madame already, and no matter how well she managed the servants, he’d throw her in the dungeon with Lady Alys. Yet, what should I tell him? Lady Marguerite thinks... *I’m turning you against her? Distracting you, because I am suicidal? Distracting you, because I am... I am...*

In love with you.

My hands went clammy, and I rubbed Marie’s back without thinking. Thank goodness I only needed to concentrate for initial contact when touching someone of the castle. Marie’d know something was wrong if my touch disappeared.

My breath: too rapid. I sucked in one great gulp of air and pain flared, bringing tears to my eyes.

Love? True, full-blown love? When had that happened? *No wonder Madame's Command has been weaker recently.* Madame could Command a servant to do things, but at some point a person's values and emotions got in the way. She could not Command Charles the butcher to stop trying to take his life. She could not Command Marie to stop breathing, or for her to murder me.

She could Command me to persuade Seline to love him, although it had never been a strong Command. 'Fall in love' was vague compared to 'steal.' And I hated deception. The idea of Seline loving a temperamental, self-centered beast had horrified me. The only reason such a Command worked at all was because I understood what would happen if Sibyla arrived and found nothing changed.

As my perception of Gautier improved, however, the Command hadn't strengthened. It had weakened. Not from solid morals and stubbornness. No. Somehow I had fallen in love. No woman's heart is pure enough to wish her man's favor on another.

The Command still existed. Faint pressure always rested upon my chest, but now the strength of my own heart had subdued it.

Marie stopped crying, and I heard her rubbing her eyes. "I need you to do something."

"If I can," I said. My newfound feelings made my head spin.

"If Master comes..." She faltered. "Don't make him as angry as he was with Lady Alys. But I need you to—to—" She couldn't say it within the restrictions of the Command.

"Make him angry with you?" I said. "Marie, I will not turn him against you."

Her hand thunked the bed. "Dammit, Claudette. *Think.* Next time he comes, I need you to think."

She couldn't tell me.

"I'll take your bowl. And here's a potion the apothecary left for you."

We sat in uneasy silence until the potion put me to sleep.



N by me the next time I woke. Judging by the flameless, partly burned candle, it was the early hours of the morning. My mind felt clear. My middle, however, alternated between a throb and a burn, and my back ached from lying so long. I drowned out the pain by thinking of something more terrible.

I love him. Despite the too-dim light, I still saw the quilt, the chair by the bed, a small table. Everything but my own hand. I loved him, but Sibyla didn't care. The enchantment went on.

Unless I need to confess it. My heart fluttered like an overexcited butterfly. I whispered into the silent night. "Gautier, I love you."

A heartbeat. Two. I raised my hand.

Invisible.

Heat prickled my eyelids. I could think of two possibilities as to why the spell didn't break. Gautier had said it was not enough for a woman to love him; he needed to love her in return. What did he feel for me? Without a doubt, he liked me. *He enjoys my teasing, my playfulness.* I remembered Gautier tipping his head back, telling me to rest against his arm as he read. I remembered him mauling Lady Alys for hurting me. I remembered my hand in his.

After I'd asked.

My breath came quicker, as if I were about to cry. My middle constricted, and the flash of pain burned away the tears. No. I would *not* agonize over whether he loved me or not. I would not, because—because—there was a better reason.

My wants, his wants. They don't matter. It's what Sibyla wants. She had thickened the forest and darkened its branches to hide the path to the castle. She had cursed his face so that no woman would recognize him as human. She had forbidden him to speak of the enchantment to outsiders, so he couldn't explain he was really a prince. Finally, she had compelled Gautier to propose to anyone he dined with.

Wasn't it obvious? Sibyla meant for someone outside the castle to break the spell. Not a servant. *Not an impertinent guttersnipe with a bad leg. I may be good enough to be his friend, but to be something more?*

Gautier understood that. *I will not let you die*, he had said. To prevent my death, he needed to break the spell. If Gautier spent time with Seline, then he believed she was the key. Regardless of what he felt for me.

So he painted with Seline. He read with Seline, he walked with Seline, he played games with Seline. I'd be alone. Like now. Like I'd been when I'd woken after the stabbing. Seline had been here, but not him.

He held my hand, but only after I'd asked.

I cried myself back to sleep.



L the physician visited. He examined my wound by feel, battered me with questions, and grunted.

"You may try leaving the bed tomorrow if you rest and eat well today," he said. "No more than a short outing within these chambers. A trip to wash up, to relieve yourself. That sort of thing." A packet emerged and tipped powder into the cup on the bedside table. "Here. You must still be in a lot of pain."

"Servants cannot afford drugs," I said. If I drank the potion, though, I could sleep and forget for a while longer. I looked away from the cup. "I can handle pain."

He left it on the side table.

Marie sat in the corner, not speaking. If we didn't speak, she couldn't have anything to say to Madame. I sat and seethed and tried to think non-bitter thoughts. Now I knew why people learned to read. If you focused on the thoughts left by others, you did not have time to think your own.

When the door creaked open after a half hour of silence, I nearly squealed with joy. Seline's face peeked around the doorframe. "Claudette, are you awake?"

I fluffed the pillow.

The door flew wide, the room brightening with her smile. Her hair cascaded down her back in long waves. Marie had dressed her, but apparently Seline hadn't let her do her hair.

"How are you feeling?" Seline placed her hand on the canopy post and quivered as if she wanted to run in circles. "Are you stronger? Is there much pain?"

"She's always asking questions she knows I cannot answer," I told Marie.

"She can't help it. She adores you," Marie said. I heard her skirt swish. "I will leave you two alone. I'm not Commanded to spy on her."

Marie's presence left the room.

"One moment, Claudette," Seline said. "I have a surprise for you!"

She darted to the sitting room and returned with an object covered with a cloth. Something rectangular, short but wide... My curiosity deflated and floundered on the sea of depression. A painting. They had painted me a picture last night. *At least they thought of me*, I chided myself. If Seline did break the spell, I would need to be happy for them. He'd live. I'd live. This was a good time to practice not being jealous.

Seline eased onto the bed, eying the lump that was my body and taking care not to jostle me. She pointed. "Is this your lap?"

Close. I patted my actual lap, striking the quilt hard enough to make an indentation.

She slid the painting where I indicated, holding it so it tilted toward my face. "One, two, three!"

She whisked the fabric away, revealing a painting of white and black lines.

"Do you know what it is?" Seline could barely speak through her excitement. "It's a piano, Claudette! Some of the keys, anyway. Beast said it was enough for you to start with. They're the right size and everything. We made sure."

Start with? As I stared, I began to recognize the shapes. White keys, black keys. There was a letter on each white key. I knew *C*, *E*, and *A*—they were in my name—but not the others. Along the top of the painting were horizontal lines with a black dot above each key.

"I worried you'd be bored while you recovered. I asked Beast how we could amuse you, and he came up with the idea of music lessons. He taught me a little last night." Seline pointed to the letters and began to explain how they were the names of the keys. She wiggled on the bed until she sat beside me, and she showed me which fingers to use to make a scale. "Beast said to practice hitting each one, step-step-step, in order. Also..."

She let the painting fall backward and rummaged in a pocket. She smoothed several pieces of paper, each with those horizontal lines speckled with dots. Sheet music. How many times had I stared at the prince's, left on the grand after his lessons? Above each dot, a tiny handwritten number told me which finger to use. It must have taken Seline an hour or more to record each with Gautier's instructions.

"Beast said to memorize your scale first, and then to use the painting to learn the songs. You'll have to imagine the sounds for now, I'm afraid." She gloomed a bit at that, then frowned. "Gracious, it's dark in here. You'll need more than one candle to learn."

Seline hopped off the bed and took the lone candle around the room. She lit everything she found. Light spilled through the doorway as well, for the sitting room had a window. I caressed the smooth, painted keys as she rendered the room golden.

For years, I had dusted shelf after shelf of books. Not once had I resented the orphanages for not teaching me to read. Never had I removed a book, caressed its pages, and wondered what secrets it held. But the piano! So often I'd run my fingers over the smooth keys, pretending to play.

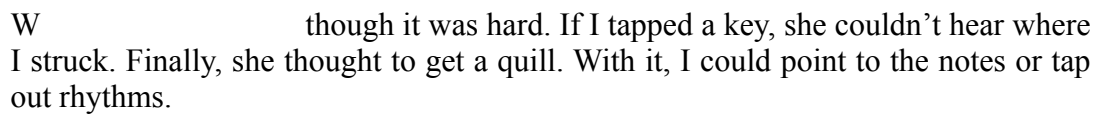
"What do you think?" Seline asked, returning the candle to its place. "Is it a good gift?"

I tapped where the quilt had darkened from light to forest green.

"You're crying." She clasped her hands together so tightly, it was as if being unable to hug me was about to kill her. "I'm so happy! Beast will be, too."

"Thank you," I said. I wished she could hear me. Without the drugs, I managed to concentrate. I put my hand on hers and squeezed. That brought tears to her eyes.

Her eyes passed over the indent in the pillows, over the lump under the covers. Something crossed her features: a wondering, perhaps. Something I didn't know how to respond to. Then she picked up the painting and asked if I wanted to go over it again.



Once finished, Seline stretched. “I’m going to go riding this afternoon, but I’ll return after. I asked them to bring supper on trays here, so I will be closer to you. Practice while I am gone, and once you recover, you can impress Beast with how far you’ve come.”

How depressing, to receive one dream and have it replaced by another.

CHAPTER 25

Days passed. Precious, precious days. I healed quickly, but staring at my calendar, the hours dragged as if I were watching a floor dry. Half my time I spent ignoring my Marie-shadow while I pored over my music. The rest, I listened to Seline chatter. Bertram came a few times in the beginning, but my sharp words and standoffish attitude drove him away. He didn't deserve it, but I didn't want to see him. I wanted to see Gautier.

He never came to visit.

Gautier saw Seline every night, and sometimes during the day. Madame, like her or not, was clever and probably right. *Claudette's a distraction*, she had told Lady Alys. He didn't need my pert comments distracting him from Seline's sweetness. My being out of the way was finally allowing them to fall in love. The remnant of Madame's Command seemed to agree, for while the lingering pressure did not vanish, it did not grow heavier, either.

It will end soon, one way or another. I will be dead, or I will be visible. I'll deal with it once I know the throw of the dice.



A I was strong enough to sit most of the day, though I couldn't walk far. A commotion came from the Lily Suite's sitting room late in the morning. When I opened the door, I saw Seline directing several servants with the furniture. Several chairs and tables were floating about the room as an upright piano floated in.

I drew in a deep breath, the wound barely throbbing in response. Tears pricked my eyes. I'd thought, with how little time we had left, my 'lessons' would have stayed in my head.

Seline noticed the ajar door. She asked me to wave a handkerchief as someone began to tune the piano.

"See what Beast found?" she said with smugness. "Master Arnaud will be here shortly to teach you. I'll go for a walk and return for dinner, and I can listen to you practice before my afternoon ride."

I thanked her, uselessly, and I wondered. Beast had found the piano, but had he thought of it by himself, or had Seline asked him if the castle had one?

Master Arnaud, it turned out, was the pianist who had performed for us so many nights ago, and he taught as well as he played. His explanations were clear and my study proved helpful.

"You are much more patient than he," Master Arnaud said after I tried a line of notes for the thousandth time. Years ago, he had taught a small, tantrum-prone boy.

“When His Highness mangled sections, he banged the keys in a flurry and shouted, ‘I’ll never play again!’ Time after time after time. He always came back.”

“And you continued to teach him? I mean, he’s the prince, so he could order you. But that must have been hard.”

“Passion is not always a bad trait.” Master Arnaud opened the window, for the sitting room had grown warm. “His Highness has talent, but it’s passion that fuels him. He only lost his temper because he wanted the music so badly. Is that not forgivable? Had he not been born a prince, he would have become a master like myself.”

I remembered Gautier’s anguish, on the day he’d told me that I was free to choose my fate while he could never choose his. I pressed a key, a low one. “He misses it.”

Birds stopped singing outside, as if they grew as somber as we. Master Arnaud sighed. “That fairy thought it cruel to twist his handsome face, but his hands are the greater sorrow. She mangled his heart when she did that.” He placed a sheet of music in front of me. “It is nice to teach again, and to a woman so in love.”

I inhaled and my wound gave me a half-hearted ache. “Am I?”

“You’ve learned this much from a painting and some sheet music? I say it’s safe to say that you share our prince’s passion.”

In love with the piano. I breathed a sigh of relief and placed my hands on the keys. I started the song with a light heart. My secret, safe. But then I fumbled to a halt.

The birds had stopped singing. On the breeze: cinnamon and musk. Gautier walked near the lily pond below... and Seline had told me she planned to go walking this afternoon. I should have continued playing, but my fingers had stiffened into wood.

“I have asked too much from someone so recently injured,” Master Arnaud said. The music whisked from the tray to a stack on top of the piano. “Shall I help you to a chair? I can concentrate for the contact if you are in pain.”

“I’ll manage,” I said. I had to.



“B Seline said as we began our breakfast together in her room. “Since you’ve managed sitting at the piano for a week, the physician thinks you may be strong enough to walk to the study tonight. Can you?”

The flaky roll I was eating became too flaky. I reached for water to wash it down.

“We miss you so much. Beast said that if it is too far for you, we can spend the evening in the main library. It’s much closer.”

I stared at the half-eaten roll. *Why not?* Why hadn’t I gone with her earlier? That was the real question. Being in love had made me a moping idiot.

“Claudette? You’ve stopped moving. Oh, I wish Beast were here! Something’s bothering you, I know it.” She poured me more tea, as if that would help.

“I’ll go,” I said. I scowled and took a sip. Why invisible *and* mute? I ripped the remainder of my roll into three pieces and positioned them around her teacup.

Seline broke into a smile when she understood. “If you become tired, tell Beast. What should we do? A game may be too taxing.”

“Madame won’t like this,” Marie said from the doorway as Seline talked.

I turned in my seat, ignoring poor Seline as she listed ideas to entertain me. “I didn’t realize you were still around. You’re going to tell Madame, aren’t you?”

“I have no choice.” Marie sounded like a worn-out old woman with all her babes in graves.

“I know.” I pressed my lips together. “Go. Get it over with. If you put it off, the compulsion will make you wretched.”

Marie sniffled. “I will make it up to you. Somehow.”

She left, and Seline talked on. I prepared myself mentally for battle. Somehow, Madame had guessed my love. I’d become her enemy when I’d defied her, but certainly she realized I didn’t want to die? *Except, I don’t think Gautier told her. She believes we’ll continue forever like this: invisible and unchanging.* If that were so, why wouldn’t a servant want to seduce a prince into being hers forever?

I didn’t know if I could tell Madame the truth. Gautier hadn’t. He must have a reason why. An eternity of obscurity had driven Madame to set Lady Alys on us, so what would she do with *death* to spur her? Her opinion of me was so low, she could believe me selfish enough to want to die a romantic death with the prince.

I waited for her in the Lily Suite’s cramped sitting room, the tea service left at the sideboard by the piano. I’d managed to push two of the green-velveted chairs to face the door. Not the window. Not the fireplace. I left the table between the chairs free of flowers. I’d learned much about hospitality from Seline, and I hoped Madame would notice the small insults.

Instead of Master Arnaud coming for my lesson, Madame burst through the door without knocking.

“You do realize how many days are left?” she said as soon as she entered.

“Have a seat,” I said, kicking the empty chair’s leg. “I wouldn’t want you uncomfortable as you yell at me.”

“You snippy little—”

“Lady Alys attacked Seline because of you,” I said with a voice of stone. “You no longer deserve my respect.”

She paused. The door to the hallway clicked closed. “His Highness has made no such accusation.”

“Only because I have not told him.”

She made a sound of disgust. “To think, a member of the royal household, following the whims of a dreck. You have no proof.”

I gritted my teeth. Lady Alys, I was sure, wouldn’t incriminate Madame. Plus, she was unreliable and half crazy. *But Gautier would listen to a dreck, and that’s what infuriates Madame.*

Madame didn’t do me the courtesy of sitting. I could feel her looming over me, her words sounding right above my head. “I have heard that you plan on joining him tonight.”

“Seline did ask me to come.”

“You are not feeling well.”

The woman was impossible. “I have done exactly as you ordered. They’re speaking, they’re touching—”

“You are a distraction and a menace.” The air whooshed in front of me as if she were thrusting a finger in my face. “I know how many times you have been alone with him. Times when he should have been with Seline. When you are in the room, he focuses on you and not on her.”

“They talk about me because I’m something they have in common,” I said. I mentally cursed Bertram. The jilted man exaggerated the truth. No wonder Madame thought I was trying to seduce the prince. “That’s not how it is at all. I’m their

friend. Gautier—”

Madame *hissed*. “A guttersnipe, referring to royal blood in such an informal fashion! You have made him completely unpredictable!”

“You’re only upset because you’re no longer in control.” I stood as she inhaled, a hand’s breadth from my face. “You can’t manipulate him anymore. He doesn’t listen to you.”

“I’m not worried about my position. I’m worried about running an empty castle for eternity. And I am *appalled* at the impropriety—”

“You’re the one who made me a lady.” I wanted to tear out my hair in frustration; couldn’t she forget about me for a moment? “We are on the same side! Are you so blinded by the loss of power that you don’t see how he’s *trying*?”

Silence. Then a short burst of breath. A laugh? “I assure you, I am not the one blinded. Claudette, you are forbidden to see him in the evenings, with or without Seline. Furthermore, you are forbidden to tell him I have ordered you thusly.”

My chest constricted and bile seared my throat. “You witch.”

“Vileness, on cue. Call me what you will, but I’m not letting a hussy ruin it all.” Sharp footsteps and the jostle of keys went toward the door.

“*Gautier* will know something’s wrong.” I emphasized his name to spite her and heard the satisfying sound of teeth grinding together.

The grind changed to another burst of laughter. “Will he? Things have changed, Claudette. How many days has he not seen you? How many days has he spent only with Seline?”

I pressed my lips together. I knew exactly the number of days since he held my hand, and saying so would sound pathetic.

Yet my silence told her that I’d been counting, and her mocking laugh calmed to a chuckle. “He’s trying, you say? Without you there, he doesn’t have to try. Seline captures his attention. There’s no one to make him uncomfortable, no one to upset him. Did you know, he has not thrown a single tantrum since Alys’s blunder?”

Every word a blow. For she was right. Even on the day of the attack, had I not exasperated him at the swan pond? Elegant Seline, closer to noble blood than I. Her family’s former riches had made her a part of his world, and she knew so well how to behave and share that life: her ideas for entertainment, the topics she chose for conversation.

She’d been so happy, too, since the attack. She said she missed me, that they missed me, but her every word and gesture spoke of the happiness she felt in her current situation.

“So there you have it,” Madame said. “If His Highness does think to question your absence, for I’m sure Seline will wonder why you do not come, then you can tell him that my Command for Seline to fall in love presses upon you.”

Her suggestion did not hold the weight of a Command. It didn’t need to. The doubt had already been planted: They fell in love better without me. The mere thought of going now constricted my chest.

“I hate you,” I said. My eyes prickled, hot.

“Most of your kind do.” The door slammed.

I grabbed the chair’s cushion and hurled it at the closed door. It didn’t make me feel better. Nor did the obscenities hurtling through my mind, attacking her hygiene, her ancestry, her sexual habits. In the end, I collapsed on the floor and cried angry tears of frustration.

She’s wrong. She’s lying to keep me away. They miss me. Both of them.

Yet there was one thing I could not doubt: Madame’s dedication to ending the curse. She’d do anything, hurt anyone, to stop it. Hadn’t she proved so, again and

again? Right now, she believed my seeing them would jeopardize us all.

Only because she thinks I'm trying to seduce him. She said it herself; she called me a hussy. I dug my fingers into the thick carpeting as I argued in my head. Madame Commanded me to make Seline fall in love. Before she Commanded me to stay away. I must follow that first Command. I must go and make sure.

The pressure began to lift, and with it, the seed of triumph grew. *Gautier, he Commanded me, too. He Commanded me to be Seline's lady-in-waiting. It's my duty to attend her. So. I must obey him, and I must find out for myself, for Madame could be... incorrect. Surely they still need my help to fall in love.*



I sat on the floor when Seline returned. We ate supper in her rooms, and I pushed the food around my plate. I couldn't eat. I could barely listen as Seline spoke. Over and over I repeated to myself I had to go, I had to serve, I had to be certain.

Walking down the hallway after supper was the worst. With each step, I defied one of Madame's Commands. With each step, I obeyed others. By the time we reached the study, I knew what milk in a butter churn felt like.

Gautier was already there. He bowed and my breath caught in my throat. I'd been so focused on making it down the hallway, I hadn't given thought to the fact that this was the first I'd seen him since realizing my love. *Run*, part of me screamed. *I've missed him*, the other part of me sighed.

"I brought her," Seline said. Her forehead wrinkled and she didn't sit. "She didn't eat much at supper. I'm not sure how she's feeling."

"You are unwell?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

His eyebrows lowered as those blue eyes looked through me. "You sound strained. Please, sit."

Seline hurried with the tea. "Here. This will help."

"Really, I am—" Seline shook the cup in front of the sofa, and I took it before it spilled everywhere. *As if tea, of all things, can make everything better.* I took a sip. "Gautier, don't distress her. I am fine, really. I just..."

He waited for reassurance. Seline watched his face.

I sighed into the teacup. *How do I tell him Madame is meddling again?* Especially when Madame did so because she believed I threw myself at him for a throne. Calculating witch. There was no way I could find a way around her Command of silence. Not if I wanted to risk him learning my secret.

I bowed my head and found an answer that rang with truth even as it disgusted me. "Four days."

He turned his head away from me and saw Seline watching him. He forced a reassuring smile: a grim look that threatened to give away his lie. "She is merely tired. Too much time at the piano."

Seline shook her head. "I worried about that. Her lesson was today. Claudette, if you need to go to bed early, just say so."

Don't give me an excuse. "I want to stay."

"Maybe I could read," Gautier said. "I know you planned some riddles, Lady Seline, but this way—"

"That's a much better idea." Seline hurried to the table by the wall and fetched a book with a marker in the center. "Poetry. Very restful."

My heart twisted. *Poetry*. With a marker. They'd never read poetry with me there. If they'd started it without me... My imagination hurtled onward, picturing Seline here on the sofa beside him, so very close, and his words washing over her and him glancing at her just so and— *You have to deal with this. Tonight. All your life, if this works.*

And underneath, Madame's whisper: *Seline captures his attention.*

Seline handed the book to me.

I took a deep breath against the constriction in my chest. Without thinking, for thinking might lead to losing to the Command, I shifted to the side so Gautier could join me on the sofa. He took the book in his massive hand so that I would not need to hold it. I only needed to listen and turn the pages. Seline settled in her chair, rested her teacup in her lap, and closed her eyes with anticipated pleasure.

She is happy. She is in the same room as him and happy. I am fulfilling the Command. I repeated the words over and over. His heat engulfed me, trying to sway my concentration. Had I been this close to him last time? If I only moved a little to the right, I could nuzzle against him as he read.

I didn't hear the first poem. Nor the second. He nodded, and I turned the page.

"That last one was about my home," Seline said. Her eyes were completely dry. "Port Arluea, back when Pappa still had the fleet."

Gautier winced. "Forgive me, I—"

Seline waved the apology away. "The gardens here have more beauty than Arluea ever did. Please, read the next poem."

"She likes it here," I said. No wistfulness, no longing.

Gautier nodded, ever so slightly, and continued reading.

They don't need me. I sat forward so he wouldn't feel my trembling. Madame had not lied. Without me, things had become relaxed. Comfortable. Seline could talk of her past without tears. Gautier could touch her in reassurance.

The next time I turned the page, it shook.

Gautier lowered the book. "Claudette, tell me what is wrong."

Seline straightened in her chair.

"It's—it's—" I would *not* cry in front of him. Nor would I pass out from the Command, which would happen soon. "I need to go back. I am sorry."

Gautier surged to his feet. "I'm going to help Lady Claudette to her rooms."

"I'll come, too," Seline said. She moved her empty cup to the table. "Maybe I can help her to bed."

"No," I said, with a gasp. Stupid Command! "You both stay. I am sleepy, nothing more. I don't want to ruin your evening."

Seline noticed Gautier's hesitation. She hovered between sitting and standing, waiting for him to relay the conversation we were not having.

"I will take her," he said with finality. Seline nodded and lowered. "Claudette merely needs sleep. I will return shortly."

I didn't dare argue with him, not with his jaw set like that. I took the arm he offered. I needed it; Madame's Command made my head spin. Somehow he directed me into the hall, but the pressure did not cease. Not while he was near.

"There is something wrong," he said. There were only a few servants in the hallway at this time of night, but he spoke low enough that they could not overhear. "You aren't even teasing me."

I couldn't speak.

He pulled me into an alcove. I nearly knocked over a vase as he tucked us out of sight.

"Claudette, please." His hands had no trouble finding my arms. He squeezed them gently. It was a concerned gesture, a pleading one. "Talk to me."

I closed my eyes. I was glad he could not see. "I cannot... I cannot come. In the evenings."

"I did something wrong."

"No! No, you—"

"Is it because I stayed away? I feared upsetting you while you healed."

"It's nothing you did." Yet, it was entirely about him. He was too close, smashed into this small space with me. Too close but too far. "I want to come. I enjoy being with you and Seline. But I cannot."

His expression twisted. "I do not understand."

Once again, I frustrated him. I'd laugh, if it wouldn't hurt. Madame's suggestion came to my lips, bitter on my tongue. "You remember what the Lady of the Keys ordered me?"

His grip tightened, but then he remembered what he held.

"There are only four days, and I—it's hard to say." A deep breath. *Speak the truth.* "The pressure is too strong, and I cannot fight. I cannot fight."

"Shhh. I understand. The curse weighs on me as well." His thumb caressed my shoulder, as well as a talon could caress. He swallowed. "I wish I could see your face. I wish I could—damn it all! Other than the Command, though, you are well? You are stronger?"

"Yes."

He exhaled. "Good." His right hand continued to brush my arm. I wished he wouldn't do that. "If it is hard for you to be around Seline and me, well, in the afternoons, when she rides, I could... I could visit you."

I would like that. Madame had said nothing about afternoons. But, no. She'd only give me a new order. Lord, it hurt me to say it. "I think it best if you did not. It would be easier. On me."

He didn't say anything. Did he catch the lie? Could he tell how desperately I wished the opposite of my words? I sniffed, in an attempt to stop a tear, but it dripped into visibility anyway.

Gautier stared at it, a sparkle seeping into velvet. "I am sorry."

"A few days and it's over." Or beginning.

He walked me the rest of the way in silence. I suppressed the rest of my tears, but I leaned heavily on him. I couldn't help it. The pressure, too strong. The fear that I'd never touch him again, stronger yet.

"I hate lying to her," he said outside the Lily Suite, "but I will say that the physician was mistaken. You need more rest. It'll be easy for her to believe. She still does not comprehend how quickly we heal under the enchantment."

"And I am invisible. The physician cannot see me when he examines me. That is why he was wrong."

He nodded. "Go to bed early from now on. Practice your music when Seline is riding or with me."

I'd practice often, then. "I will."

"If there is anything I can do..."

I gave a sick little half laugh. "Take away Madame's Commands?"

Gautier did not catch the plural. His jaw twitched, and I feared I angered him. Or brought to surface helpless frustration. "You may as well ask me to make you visible."

I did not ask if he loved Seline yet. Fighting the Commands had left my heart too weak. Instead, we parted. I could not even find the strength to tell him goodbye.

CHAPTER 26

After Seline left for her afternoon ride the next day, Marie joined me for my piano practice. As she requested I play her favorite song, she vanished. *Poof. Gone.*

My stomach clenched. Gautier could whisk us across the castle like that. So could, I now knew, Seline; at least, she had such authority over her lady-in-waiting. Could Madame? No matter who had Summoned Marie, the urgency that a *whoosh* demanded could not be good.

I banged out a few mangled songs before I gave up. I threw the window open and leaned out to search. Below, lilies floated in a small, picturesque pond, and sprays of white flowers rimmed the shore. In the distance, a lone figure rode on a horse to nowhere in particular. Seeing Seline riding carefree eased my anxiety a notch.

Within my range, I Sensed no one other than a lone gardener. I shut the window to pace. Three steps in, the door creaked open and I went rigid.

The door closed as a brown-papered parcel hovered.

"What is that?" I asked. My muscles didn't relax, and the wound gave a slight protest despite being mostly healed.

"Master Summoned me," Marie said. She sounded as if she were going to be sick.

"Master?" I repeated. The foreboding evaporated, and I eyed the parcel. "Is that... a gift? For me?"

"It is for you," she said. By now, I could hear the difference between Marie-displeased-because-she-disapproved and Marie-displeased-because-of-Madame. The way she clipped the words, it was Madame's orders upsetting her. In fact, I suspected Marie of finally accepting the idea of Gautier's and my friendship.

"You'll have to see what it is, then," I said.

Inside I sang.

He gave me a gift! He gave me a gift!

Whatever it was, I hoped it thoroughly scandalized Madame.

I plucked the package from the air. It was small, rectangular, and flat. Surprisingly heavy. The paper, neatly creased and hugging the box, must have been folded by the valet or some other servant. I brought it to a chair while Marie pulled another close.

I ripped some paper, paused. "I give you permission to be excited."

"Claudette..."

"It's a gift! You know how rarely I get gifts." I let the paper fall on the floor and set a plain wooden box in my lap. "Admit it. You're at least curious."

A sigh. "You're impossible."

I giggled and lifted the lid.

My laughter died.

"That's a strange gift," Marie said. The chair creaked, and her words came close as she peered inside the box. "Why would he give you a mirror?"

A silver hand glass nestled face-down in black velvet. Roses etched the metal. I recognized the mirror instantly. It had shown me Gautier as he readied in another room, and then it had shown me a shredded painting: what had been.

The mirror shot into the air, followed by the cream-colored paper that had lain underneath it. I jumped to my feet as they flew out of reach.

"Marie," I said as evenly as I could. Inside, a spark of panic. "Give them back. I know Madame's Commanded you to—"

"Master told me there was a note and asked me to read it to you," Marie said, her voice squeaking.

Oh, Gautier. You didn't think.

He didn't know Madame controlled Marie; he thought she was still a friend. But Madame wasn't the problem. I hoped. The problem was Marie herself.

"I already know what the note says," I told her. Half true. Gautier hadn't known that I'd used the mirror in his sitting room, so I suspected the note contained instructions for the magical looking glass. "There's no need to read it. We can destroy it."

The mirror twisted in the air as if Marie tucked it under her arm. The note began to unfold.

I snatched the paper. Marie held fast. The paper grew taut.

"You can fight the Command," I said. With my free hand I felt along, trying to concentrate enough to pry her fingers away. "You can fool it, or if you resist it long enough and I can get the note from you—"

"I can't!" Marie gasped. The paper shifted her way. With our invisible fingers unable to block the words, she began to read aloud. "Dear Claudette... Since... Since you..."

I yanked. Paper could tear. If it tore in just the right way, her fragment would be useless.

"Cannot be with... us, I wish... to re—re—relieve? Relieve. Relieve your—"

He wants me to be with them, even though we are apart. I pulled harder. *Oh, Gautier. You didn't think of Marie! Even with Madame controlling her, she would be curious.* And with Madame's Command, she was compelled to look into the glass.

"Loneliness... with this mirror."

"Marie, stop!" Gautier had known it for a century. He'd known it for so long that he'd forgotten. He'd forgotten that we servants didn't know, that Lady Marguerite and Lord Antoine hadn't told us.

Marie was going to look in the glass, hoping to see her twelve-year-old sister.

Yanking was not working. I added a twist.

The paper split down the middle.

Each of us staggered backward. I collided with the piano, making a *whaaooooom*, low and deep, and the chair opposite scooted away from Marie's fall. I began to rip my half of the note into teeny-tiny pieces and shove each into my mouth.

Marie's half oriented itself. As I ripped and chewed, she said, "When? Gaze into the... whom you wish to see... show you."

I spat out a pulpy wad as she gasped.

"Does he mean it shows—"

"Give me the mirror!" I pushed myself from the piano.

Too late. The glass had swung upright. As I lunged, a flash radiated from the glass, brightening the chair behind Marie. She cried out at what she saw.

I didn't need to wrestle the looking glass away. It fell into my hand.

I flipped it around to see the image.

"She's not dead!" I said.

There, in the glass, an ancient woman tottered toward a tidy hearth. She leaned against the wall for support as she poked at the fire with a gnarled cane.

Marie's half of the note fluttered to the ground. "What do you mean, *she's not dead*? I wanted to see my sister, but that's—that cannot be—how could it be?"

The disbelief—the fear—it wounded more than Alys's dagger. With both hands, I presented the mirror to her as if it were a treasure more valuable than the royal roses. "That is her."

The mirror's weight shifted. "It cannot! She's—she's old. She can barely move. She looks like she'll die at any moment!" A half sob. "That cannot be Aimee."

"Time outside—" My throat closed on my words. I'd forgotten. Madame had ordered me, back in the beginning, not to speak of the curse's details to other servants. "It is her."

"Time..." Long moments passed. The mirror trembled, and tears laced Marie's next words. "Why did you not tell me? Madame?"

"Yes."

"It's only been ten years."

I chose my words with care. "That lady, she looks to be, oh, perhaps one hundred and two?"

"No one lives that long," Marie said. The mirror dropped to the floor. The image flashed, showing the reflection of the ceiling. "No one lives that long."

But they did. Very, very rarely. I picked up the mirror and thought of Aimee, the little toddler I'd met but once. The image flashed again, showing the ancient woman lowering herself into a wicker chair. Her skin looked more delicate than paper. Translucent. The chair beside hers was mostly out of the mirror's view, but I spotted another skirt. A daughter or friend, perhaps.

The mirror took itself out of my hands once again, and another flash followed. I angled myself to see... a gravestone. Another flash. Another grave. Another. Another. Sometimes not even a stone, just a grassy patch.

A flash. The Lily Suite, as if the mirror reflected normally; not normally, for the image was askew. Marie was thinking of me.

A final flash. Seline, her hair flying backward, rode a galloping horse through eternal spring.

"They... they are all dead," Marie said.

A gravestone again.

I eased the mirror out of Marie's hands as she sobbed. I took it to my room and placed it, face-down, on the bedside table. Then I returned to Marie, concentrated, and held her as she mourned.

CHAPTER 27

Not once did I pick up the mirror. It stayed, untouched, on my bedside table. At night I undressed Seline as she told me of her happy times with Beast. As I crawled into bed, I crossed off days. All days but one.

Seline did not know the importance of the day. In the morning she gave me a one-woman performance of some comedy, affecting voices as she read the script. I laughed, but it was a nervous, sickened laugh, and I was glad she could not hear. Before her afternoon ride, she asked me to pick out an especially lovely dress. Beast had invited her to dine with him. My soul crumbled as I laid out her best dress: a green silk embroidered with silver.

I went to the piano for comfort, choosing a sad, mournful song. Simple, but it reflected my heart.

Mid-song, I sighed. As I inhaled, my fingers paused. Cinnamon. Cinnamon and musk.

"I am sorry," Gautier said. He leaned against the doorframe. "I didn't mean for you to stop."

My insides went all stupid. I wanted to squeal at the sight of him. Marie was reading by the window in Seline's bedroom, though, so I restrained myself. Not to mention that squealing in front of him would have been tremendously embarrassing.

"I am glad you came to see me," I said.

Not too bad. Just a small squeak.

He did not leave the doorway. "You said not to, but I thought today..."

My joy at seeing him died. "Yes."

"If it strains you too much, because of Marguerite's Command, I will leave."

"No! Don't... don't think about Commands. I've missed you."

His head tilted to the side. "Have you? Master Arnaud says you're so infatuated with music that I'd better order you to take breaks to eat. I doubt you think of anything else."

I frowned in puzzlement. "Are you teasing me?"

His head bowed. "I'm not very good at it, am I?"

I laughed. It felt good. "You're terrible."

Gautier's gaze lifted, and he gave me a small smile. "Can you come with me to the West Wing?"

Wariness. I glanced at the cracked door to Seline's bedroom. "Why?"

"I thought you'd like to try my piano."

I inhaled. His piano. The mahogany grand. "Could I?"

Another small, if fanged, smile. "I'd be honored if you'd play."

I grabbed my music. Behind us, Marie's presence drifted into the sitting room, then the hallway. From there she went in the opposite direction.

Madame cannot do anything to me, not when I'm with him.

Not when we have only hours left.

But I didn't want to think about the last of our time slipping away. I turned my attention to the warm, visible beast beside me. He was dressed comfortably in a loose ivory shirt and dark breeches. He was so very different from the tattered monster. He walked differently, too. No longer hunched but upright. Like a man.

A realization suddenly struck, with thousands of flutters in my middle. "Are you going to listen to me?"

"I wish to."

"I'm not very good," I said. "My songs are simple."

"Don't be nervous. I've already heard you."

That did not help anything. "How long were you standing there?"

"People are listening," he said, as quietly as he could manage.

Right. Servants. I had completely forgotten about them. Did he know Madame spied on him? Even if he did not, I knew all too well how bored parlormaid's yearned for any gossip at all. They'd know if the prince, the only visible person of the castle, visited a lady in her private chambers. It didn't matter if he went no farther than the doorway, or if she weren't a lady but only a maid. A servant girl made even better gossip. Come to think of it, he should not have stayed with me that night he held my hand. Nor should I have gone to his private chambers, even to beg him to visit Seline.

No wonder Madame thought me a hussy.

But it shouldn't matter. A little of my rebellious nature flared. *Not today.*

I stayed silent until we entered the Harmony Room. Dust had gathered without me to tend it. I pulled open the drapes as Gautier closed the door. Then, gently, with his fingers curled to keep his claws away from the wood, he raised the piano's lid and opened the keys for me.

I propped my music on the stand. "Before I play, I want to know. How long were you there?"

He positioned a large chair so he could see the keys. His words came out gruff, as they always did when he felt awkward. "I did not hear the beginning of the song."

"Then I have every right to be nervous." I sat and wiped my clammy hands on my skirt.

"I've heard you before," he said. He did not look at the piano bench but at his hands in his lap. "In the afternoons. I sit by the lily pool."

I flushed. "At my plunking and blundering?"

"Everyone plunks and blunders. You have the heart for the instrument, and it's beautiful. Skill will come later." He leaned forward, his eyes piercing even as they could not focus. "Please play for me."

I swallowed.

First I chose a ridiculously easy but playful song. Just like me, to pick something akin to laughter when I was nervous. I figured, at the least, a wrong note wouldn't ruin the mood. Once that song ended, I played the first song I'd learned. It was more notes than technique, but I knew it half-asleep. As I played, I snuck a glance at him.

Gautier's eyes were closed as he slumped in his chair. His hands were fully open and limp, palm-down on the wooden arms. I had never seen him so much at peace. He cracked open an eye.

"You're thinking about me. Maybe looking at me. Go back to the music, Claudette."

I smiled and fumbled a key. "Don't snore."

"Play."

I grinned, and this time I lost myself.

I didn't play long. My songs were short, and even in exile I hadn't learned enough music to fill more than an hour. One song I played twice at his request: a romantic melody that made him sigh. But I did forget him. The soft, rich tones that flowed from the piano were so full and perfect, they demanded that I lose myself in them. The slightest pressure on the keys made the instrument sing. I often played louder or softer than I intended, but I didn't care. I loved it.

Finally, my hands left the ivory. "Those are all the songs I know."

His eyes slitted open, contentment still on his face. "You'll learn more."

Will I? Will she answer yes tonight?

If she did, I wouldn't be playing for him. I'd be playing for them.

"I wish I could hear *you* play," I said. Then I heard my own words and straightened with alarm. "I am sorry! I didn't mean to make you remember—"

He held up a hand to stop me. "I always remember. I am glad to hear you, though. As for myself, well."

Soon.

I stroked a key without pressing it. I considered asking about Seline, if he believed her feelings for him had deepened. If his feelings had changed. My eyes pricked with tears.

He stood and lowered the lid of the piano. I stayed on the bench.

He reached in front of me to close the keys. His heat flowed over me, and I trembled, trying to stay numb.

"Claudette," he said. He opened his hand and eased it toward me. His palm touched my shoulder, slid down my arm, found my hand. My fingers, chilled from playing, warmed in his. He swallowed. "Come. Seline will finish her ride soon, and she will panic if she does not find you."

He tugged me to my feet. Absently, I grabbed the music.

The door opened.

Gautier's grip tightened. I hissed, and his fingers loosened slightly. He straightened to his full height as he stared at the door. I tried to tug my hand free, but he refused to release it.

"Lady Marguerite," he said.

"Your Highness. Oh, and Claudette." She didn't sound surprised in the least.

I realized I truly did not know fear until that moment. Gautier, however, simply asked through clenched teeth, "What is it?"

"Lady Seline, Highness. I fear she is distressed." There was amusement in Madame's words.

"Why is that?"

"It appears she found the magic mirror."

Sheet music fluttered to the floor.

Gautier propelled my hand from his and took two giant steps away from me and the piano. "How? Did you leave—"

"I lock my room," I said faintly. Foolish! So foolish of me, to leave the mirror on the table. Yet I did always lock my room, ever since Madame had given me the calendar. The only person with a key—

"Marie," I said. A faint jangle, reminding me who else might have a key. Though, honestly. Why would Madame lower herself to snooping when she could make someone else do it?

Madame spoke. "Truly, Highness, you have yourself to blame for giving such an artifact to a careless girl. Apparently, Claudette left it where a chambermaid could find it. Should I punish Marie?"

"You Commanded her," I said. "Just like you Commanded her to spy on me."

"I don't know what you mean," Madame said.

Gautier growled. "What did Seline see?"

My blood ran cold. What had become of Marie's half of the note? She'd been able to use the mirror from those torn lines. Had I destroyed it? I didn't think so. "Marie gave Seline the note."

"The fairy gave you a powerful tool," said Madame, "and you wasted it to entertain a servant. *And* you wrote down how to use it? Tsk."

"What. Did. She. See?"

I heard the cruelest smile in Madame's voice. "Her father. He's in bed, ill. Perhaps dying."

No.

No, no, no.

If Seline saw her father ill...

"She will want to go to him," Gautier said.

"Naturally," said Madame.

"Are you insane?" Gautier's fist hovered over the chair beside him. "There is no time!"

"Time is different out there." Madame did not sound insane; she sounded calculating and confident. "Seline's heart is not where we need it to be. This gives her a chance to discover deeper feelings. Will she return? Will she abandon us? Or do you even care? You speak of time, but you haven't spent yours wisely."

Gautier lowered to all fours, no longer a man but a beast coiling to attack. "You arrogant fool! You have killed us all!"

"I have merely—" A jostle of keys. "Killed?"

"At dawn, Sibyla returns, and if—" He arched his back, and the carpet ripped. I thought once more he really ought to have a tail to thrash. An oversight from the fairy.

A small, hysterical giggle escaped. Gautier glanced over at me. Tension decreased; rage to mere fury. He glared back at Lady Marguerite. "We will die. All of us."

She took a deep, slow breath. "Then all the better one of us took action. I suggest you send Claudette with Seline. Order her to ensure Seline remembers us. Absence makes the heart fonder, does it not? And if we're lucky, your bride will return and leave *that servant* at the cottage."

"Get out!" he roared. Madame's presence vanished.

Gautier's body trembled as if fighting the urge to destroy everything around him. I do not know what possessed me, shock perhaps, but I stepped toward the impending explosion. My hands lowered onto his back, cautiously at first and then sinking as the feel of him overcame me. His ribcage expanded in a calming breath, his muscles loosened.

"Seline's calling me," he said, his voice hollow.

"I will go with you." My hands fell to my sides as he stood.

Gautier said nothing more. I had to trot to keep up with him in the hallway, but I did not ask him to slow. I left him to his thoughts, to decide to let her go or not. I felt he must. I did not know my father, but I would resent a person who kept me from saying goodbye to a loved one. More importantly, she was our friend. You did not give a friend pain unless you could not help it. But it was Gautier's—the

prince's—decision.

He entered the Lily Suite without knocking. Behind my bedroom door, Marie wept. He ignored that door. Instead, he walked through Seline's sitting room. In her bedroom, Seline was tossing simple skirts and blouses on the bed. Upon her pillow sat a silver hand mirror and a scrap of torn paper. She turned in alarm at his footsteps.

"Beast!" She glanced at her things. "I can explain—"

"You found the mirror," he said.

She followed his gaze to the hand glass. "I did."

"You saw your father."

Her lips trembled as her eyes welled up with tears. "You *did* give me the mirror. You knew I'd want to be there. You're letting me go home."

Gautier's jaw tightened and loosened.

"Thank you." She crossed the room and attacked him with a hug. A mixture of elation and dread rushed through my heart.

"But—" He hesitated.

"But?"

He took a step backward and gathered her hands in his. "I need you to return."

Her face softened. "Of course I will come back. You and Claudette—is she here?" At his nod, she continued. "You two are my best friends. I feel more at home here than I ever did anywhere."

Best friends. A happy honor for me, death for us all.

"I need you to return," Gautier said, grave, "by sunrise on the sixth day."

Her mouth opened in dismay. "So little time?"

He bowed his head and closed his eyes. "I wish to give you more. But I cannot. I am sorry."

She said nothing. Her eyes watched him; her wide, dark eyes. She wasn't stupid. She knew something had made us the way we were. She may have even guessed that Beast had once been a man.

"I can send you there," he said, opening his eyes. "To the edge of your wood."

"Could you?"

"I will send Claudette with you." He hadn't asked me. He knew I'd agree.

She brightened. "I'd like that. It would make my sister's company easier to bear, to have Claudette with me."

"And she can remind you."

Excitement faded. Seline studied his face. "Of you?"

"Of us. Claudette and me. Your home."

The same serious expression. "If I don't return?"

He opened his mouth several times, but no words came out. The enchantment, keeping him from the truth. "It would be bad."

"I understand." She frowned. "Well, I don't, but I do. How do I return?"

"I will give Claudette a ring. She is part of... this." Gautier waved a hand vaguely around. "If you enter the edge of the forest with her, she can use it to bring you both back."

"Sunrise of the sixth day."

"Earlier may be safer."

"Midnight, then." She pulled away to continue packing. Her lip trembled again.

"Thank you, Beast. This means so much to me."

"I am sorry that you had to come here."

"No." She shook her head. "I was not glad at first, but I am now."

He looked around the room, and his eyes glistened. What did he see? The Lily Room's finery versus the simplicity of her home, which I'd described to him? The emptiness of the castle versus the family that filled the cottage? Or something else?

He cleared his throat. "I will ask the apothecary to mix some medicines for your father. You should leave as soon as possible." He turned to go. "Claudette. I need to give you the ring."

I followed him into my bedroom. Sniffs and hiccups came from the corner.

He halted in the center of the small room and glared at the chair. His chest expanded. Before I could calm him, to plead for my friend, he spoke. "Marie. I am angry. It is best you leave."

"You need to Command me, Master." Her voice quivered as if she might shake to pieces. "I want to leave, but—"

I interrupted. "She can't. Lady Marguerite told her to spy on me when you are near."

"You've always been cleverer than me," Marie said, faint.

Gautier glanced over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

"Command her," I said to him. "Marie and I are like sisters, and she'd never betray me willingly. Trust me. She wants no part of this."

"Marie," he said. A pause. "Go to the kitchens. Wait there for two hours, and you are to speak to no one."

"Yes, Master." She sounded happier than I had heard her for weeks.

The moment she left, Gautier skirted around me and locked the door. "You will go?"

"Of course."

He fumbled with his right forefinger, and the fur parted to reveal a silver ring. The same one he had given me to fetch Seline, the one engraved with roses. He pulled it off, and it shrank as he held it out.

I put my palm in his. Between us, the metal was almost hot.

"Like before," he said, as I picked up the ring and pocketed it. "Put it on and twist. The rose is a part of the castle. The ring will take you to the edge of the forest, as close as it may go. I must also breathe on you, so you may exist outside the castle."

His hands found my shoulders, squeezing them. I closed my eyes. His breath wasn't hot and angry, as it had been before, but soft and tingling. Warmth and magic tickled my skin, disturbed my hair. Gautier squeezed my shoulders once more before his arms dropped to his sides.

I took a shaky breath. "What will you have me do?"

"Bring her back, if you can. Help her to remember us fondly and... bring her back."

They were the words Madame had suggested, but there was no magic in them. From the beginning, Master, Beast, and Gautier had never Commanded me, except to protect me from Madame. How had I not seen it? Even in his darkest place, Gautier had respected me in that.

"I do not want to die," I said. "I'll find a way to bring her back. Do you—" I could do it. I could ask. "Do you love her?"

"Yes," he said. My heart crumbled in my chest, until he added, "But not like that. As a friend. A dear, dear friend. Or perhaps a sister. I never had one of those."

"A sister," I said. Not good enough, but I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry.

"Claudette?" He held out his hands. I slipped mine into them, and his fingers enveloped my own. "If for some reason you cannot get Seline to return, come without her. I will wait in the Rose Garden. I will wait from the moment you leave

until the end. If the sun begins to rise, leave her. I... I wish to die with you.”

“We won’t die,” I said. My cheerfulness sounded hollow. “She will come back.”

“I am not sure that will be enough.”

I resisted the urge to snifle. Five more days. Five more days, yet he sounded certain we would fail. “We tried, though.”

“Yes, we tried.” He caressed my hands as tears spilled from his human eyes onto furred cheeks. “The Rose Garden.”

He left me, but my hands stayed warm until Seline asked to go.

CHAPTER 28

Seline stared at the cottage that had once been her home. It looked shabby and small compared to the castle. The Rose Suite alone was larger than the cottage. Paint flaked off the exterior, and the shutters hung crooked. Had it been so run down when I'd come last? I did not think so, and by her expression, neither did Seline.

"Estelle let the flowers die," she muttered. A wind came up, and she rubbed her bare arms. "Wait. It's still winter here." She glanced over her shoulder. The setting sun darkened the forest, turning the leafless trees black. "It should be spring. Claudette, you are there?"

I tugged twice on her skirt.

"When I left, it was late winter. That was... two months ago? It should be spring. There should be flowers." She eyed the cottage as it betrayed her. "It's always summer at home. Maybe I... maybe I lost track of time."

At home. She referred to the castle as home. I touched the heavy ring in my pocket. Please, *please* may she feel the same in a few days.

"Stay close to me," she said. Her forehead, pensive. "But do not let them know you are there. They will not understand. Estelle fears magic and Pappa needs rest. Tug on my skirt to talk to me, but do not carry anything."

Easy enough. I did it once before.

She approached the door, hesitated, and knocked. It took several tries. The door creaked open, and I heard a gasp.

"*Seline.*" Shock, disbelief. Estelle stared, open mouthed and pale.

"Pappa is sick?" Seline said.

"What are you doing here?"

"Please, take me to him."

Estelle stepped aside, still gaping. Seline paused before entering, and I realized she meant for me to slip in before the door closed. I did, brushing her arm as I went.

"The dirt floors are gone," Seline said. She shrugged off her pack and set it down on the hardwood floor by the door.

"Much has changed," Estelle said. Her earlier shock had stiffened into aloofness. She nodded at the floor. "The money Pappa brought from the castle."

"Ah." Seline stared at the tattered, rough wool that made up her sister's clothes. Even in her simple clothing, Seline looked out of place.

"Well?"

"Nothing." Seline's eyes flickered over the rest of the room. Rats scurried in the corners, and food crusted the outside of the hearth's kettle.

This is bad. Panic, shock, disgust.

Panic was the strongest in my heart. Seline had lived a simple life before. Not one of squalor. What had happened? And how could I ask her to leave again, with

her family fallen to this and her believing she'd be gone forever?

"I'm glad the money helped," Seline said. "Did you make your dress?"

"I did." Estelle's words were clipped. "Will you be staying long?"

Hesitation. "Five days."

"Zara will take you at the inn."

Seline's lips formed a straight line. It seemed Estelle didn't want to share a bed any more. "Where is Pappa?"

"I don't want you to overexcite him." Estelle folded her arms, and her eyes narrowed. "How do you know he's ill?"

"Has he been sick for long?" Seline said, instead of answering.

Estelle gave a slow, tense exhale. "Practically since you left."

"Don't listen to her," I told Seline. Maybe she could sense my anger. "Estelle's a small-hearted rat. She wanted you to leave. Don't let her make you think this is your fault."

"You asked me to leave," Seline said.

I smiled. "Good girl."

"Clearly, I was wrong," Estelle said. She turned her back on Seline and reached for some turnips and a knife. The room's table barely had enough space to work. "I only want what is best for Pappa. He's in his room. Maybe your arrival will make him better."

"Living in filth certainly hasn't made him better," I snarked right back at her sarcasm. The decay surrounding us made me fear what we'd find behind his door.

Gautier sent medicines. They'll help. Surely.

I slipped behind Seline as she went into a cleaner—somewhat—room. The tiny space had a fireplace now. A small fire burned there, with herbs making a sweet smoke, but underneath, the stench of illness lingered. Reynaud lay in the bed, his breath shallow. The cares I'd seen on his brow before had wrinkled him like a walnut. He barely resembled the man I'd met two months ago.

Seline gasped.

Watery eyes opened. "Seline? I have died."

Seline doused her shock with serenity and eased onto the stool by the bed. Out of his line of sight, she waved to the chair in the corner. For me. "You have not died. I am here."

He struggled against the covers. She shushed and placed a hand on his chest. Tears slipped down his cheeks. "My child. How did you escape?"

"Beast told me to come to you. He said you were sick." I grimaced at her semi-true words. "I brought medicines as well, from the castle."

"That—that monster?"

"He's not a monster, Pappa. True, Beast was not very nice when you saw him. But he's changed. He's kind and thoughtful." She sent a smile my way and chuckled. "Though he still has a temper."

"It cannot be. He was so horrible. I must be dreaming."

"I am flattered that you think I am a dream, but if you close your eyes and open them, you'll find I am still here." Her smile faded. "I am sorry I left without saying goodbye. Please, forgive me."

One of his arms broke free of the heavy blankets. He grasped Seline's hand, and his knuckles turned white. "You're here. That is what matters. Finally here. You've returned and—"

He broke into a coughing fit. Alarmed, Seline reached to him. I spotted a cup of water, snatched it, and bumped her elbow with it. She accepted the cup and eased him upward, holding him until the coughing eased and he took some sips.

Once his throat calmed, she eased him back onto the pillows. He looked even frailer in the firelight. His voice rasped. "You have returned, my little gem. You can have the spare room."

"I am only here—" She blinked. "Spare room?"

"Off your old room. We built it for the grandchildren."

"Oh?" Her brow furrowed. "Children? You mean for Louis?"

"And Emilie, Zara's second. And Natalie." His mouth crinkled as if he bit into something sour. "Natalie can sleep with her mother now that you're back."

Seline went pale. "Estelle is married?"

Reynaud shook his head. "No."

Seline shot a wild look to my chair. "How long have I been gone?"

"Nearly two years." He peered at her. "Has he enchanted you so that you forgot time?"

"He hasn't enchanted me. I've only been gone for a few months. Not years. It's warm there, like spring, or early summer."

The betrayal on her face broke my heart. She'd come to think herself our prisoner forever, and so returning had been such a boon. Yet, to realize she'd lost two years without even knowing it?

"I am sorry," I said, smoothing her hair. She jerked away, still distressed.

Reynaud misunderstood the movement and squeezed her hand. "It has been a dark two years, but all is well now. You're back, and the future is bright. That castle can stay in our nightmares." He shuddered.

How true he spoke, for if she did not return, that was precisely where we would exist.

Reynaud noticed something in her expression. "What is wrong, little gem? I know my news is a shock, but aren't you happy to have escaped?"

"I told you. He let me come... and I must return."

He strained his head toward her, for she had spoken so softly. "What?"

She closed her eyes. "I have five days. Four, really, for this one is almost over."

Reynaud's entire body spasmed. "Four days! He *is* a monster. I have not seen you in two years—"

He exploded into a coughing fit, and Seline tried to soothe him. I slipped into the hearthroom. Estelle hacked at dinner, her back toward Seline's pack. I rummaged, found a packet of medicine, and shoved it into the folds of my skirt to make it invisible.

He had nearly quieted when I returned. I bumped Seline's skirt with the packet. She snatched it and dumped it into the remaining water in Reynaud's cup.

Thank you, she mouthed.

I despaired as she coaxed medicine into him. We were asking Seline to choose between Beast, whose fate she did not understand, and the ailing man who had raised her and loved her. If only she knew. If she married Beast, royal physicians could watch over her father. He wouldn't sleep under a grungy quilt; he'd sleep on down wrapped in silk.

"Tell me of what I have missed," Seline said once he drank the last of it. "The children, the village. Do you still sell your carvings?"

She kept him to safe topics. No more talk of returning. He even smiled, talking of the grandchildren. He loved all three. Stories of their antics, the adorable things they said. Seline's expression became more and more of a mask. So much she'd missed.

Gautier, I am glad you are not here, seeing this. He'd only hate himself more. Yet, to see her pain and fully know the sacrifice she made by returning... maybe

it'd bring him to love.

Perhaps he watches in the mirror. I rubbed tears from my cheeks before they dripped into visibility. If he loved her, and she loved him, hundreds of people would live. A kingdom would continue in peace. *Even Sibyla may be happy in the end, if she knows of my broken heart. So, Claudette. Invisible tears. Always.*

By the time Estelle entered the room, I almost appreciated her arrival. But Reynaud's happiness diminished, ever so slightly, and Seline's glance to my chair told me she'd noticed.

In their hour of conversation, Reynaud had not once spoken of Estelle. The ugly part of me rejoiced at that. Estelle had driven Seline away, hoping to become the center of Reynaud's world, and she had ended up his biggest disappointment.

"I have your soup," Estelle said. It did smell delicious. She didn't clean, but she could cook. She handed it to Reynaud and walked over to my chair.

"No!" Seline cried as Estelle tried to sit.

"What?"

"I—here, take my place." Seline sprang off of the stool. I rolled my eyes. Invisible or no, I knew better than to let someone sit through me. "I should get to the inn. Zara will keep me up all night as it is."

"The inn?" Reynaud turned to Estelle. "Natalie can share your bed."

Estelle forced a thin smile. "Well, you see—"

"No, Pappa. I am fine at the inn," Seline said. "That way, Natalie's not upset with change. Please, Pappa, don't argue. I will be back in the morning. Estelle, let me give you the medicine. He has barely coughed since drinking it."

Seline spent as little time as necessary handing over the packets and giving Estelle instructions. Before I knew it, we jogged through the cold of winter's early darkness. Moonlight gave the bare trees a chill glow, like bones. The cold didn't affect me, but she shivered and rubbed her arms. I should have asked Gautier about the weather and brought her a cloak.

She didn't try to communicate with me. I hoped it was the cold keeping her silent, and not anger or despair. How was I going to convince her to leave Reynaud?



A Zara nearly fainted when she saw her sister. A beaming, slightly pudgy man ushered them through the busy common room to a private back room. He kissed Zara on the cheek and returned to his customers. I sat in an unoccupied chair at a large table and listened to it all again. No, she hadn't escaped. Beast sent Pappa medicine. He's not evil. But...

"You have to go back," Zara said.

Seline cringed, her hands gripping a mug, long grown cold. "I promised."

"You and promises," Zara said, but there was affection in her exasperation.

"It's more than that," Seline said. "I fear something bad is going to happen. Beast's been distracted, worrying. I don't know what it is, but it's terrible."

Zara raised an eyebrow. "You want to go back to a beast because something terrible is going to happen to him? Please tell me you didn't use this argument on Pappa."

Seline leaned forward. "What I mean is, they need me. I can help. Somehow."

Zara pressed her lips together. "They?"

"My friends." Seline's head twitched to the right, but she managed to not fully look at the chair I'd sat in. Six chairs, four unoccupied, only one askew from the

table. "Remember? Pappa spoke of objects moving? It turns out they're people, all of them enchanted, and they are kind. Please say you will help me."

Zara drummed her fingers on the table. It was old, marked with dents and scratches; a family's table that had seen generations. She and the children likely took their meals at it. A baby's tall chair sat in the corner. Before the beast and the rose, Seline had probably eaten a share of meals at the table as well.

Zara gave Seline a measured look. "You care about them."

My breath hitched in my throat as Seline responded. "I do."

"And you are treated well?"

"Like a princess."

Zara let out a slow breath. "Well, then. I will support you. But Pappa is so ill. Surely you can delay a few days?"

I wanted Seline to firmly respond no, but her head turned away from my chair at Zara's question. The hesitation, the avoidance. Both small, but there.

"How long has he been ill?" Seline said instead of answering. "Estelle said it's been for some time." Her voice cracked. "Since I left."

Zara snorted. "*Tsh*. He didn't take your disappearance well, but he has not been ill that long. Don't listen to Estelle. He was healthy enough until her pregnancy last year. Shameful business. But she acted the hussy, wearing that scarlet dress to every village event. Caught the eye of the tinker. He stayed a whole month, right until she began vomiting, and he hasn't been back since. Anyway. Caring for her and then the baby taxed Pappa. That's why he fell ill, worrying about them and stretching himself thin. Nothing to do with you."

Seline's despair lightened just a little at that.

"Though he does dwell on you since taking to his bed," Zara said. I wanted to smack her. "I am sure it is a comfort to him to know the beast didn't eat you."

Seline took a swallow of cold tea and made a face. She pushed the mug away. "About Pappa. Can't he live with you?"

"You don't think I've tried?" Zara folded her arms. "He won't leave Estelle. Not after that boy abandoned her. She's turned nasty, and I say if she wants to push everyone away then so be it. But he won't listen. Plus, there's Natalie, and I do agree there. Even sick he can keep an ear and eye on that little girl..." A flash of guilt softened her scowl, and she reached out to squeeze Seline's hand. "I haven't been up there as much as I ought, with the children and the inn and all. Not lately. I'll do better."

"Maybe I can clean the cottage?" Seline said. It'd only fall into disrepair again, as long as Estelle lived in the despair of the mind. The woman reminded me a little of Lady Alys: spiteful and without hope.

Lady Alys brought my thoughts to the castle, and a plan began to form. I tapped Seline's shoulder, and she jerked.

Zara released her arm. "What is it?"

"Oh. Nothing." But I accidentally shifted my chair when I tapped her again. Zara noticed. "Rather, it's my lady-in-waiting. From the castle. She wants something. What is it, Claudette?"

Zara watched, silent and amazed, as Seline's pack lifted from its place by the door to the table. I pawed through it, pulling out one of Seline's plain skirts, a blouse, and... *there*. The green silk dress I'd included for her return.

"You do live like a princess," Zara murmured as her wide eyes took in the silk. She looked to the air above the clothes. "She's a person?"

"Yes. Now let me pay attention. She cannot talk to us, but we often play charades, so I might be able to figure out what she's trying to tell us."

I'd pulled two chairs from the table and dragged over a third. Upon these I draped the dress, the skirt, and the blouse. Then... what? I had Seline, Estelle, and Reynaud, but...

I undid the clasps of the pack and stretched them between the chairs with the skirt and shirt, sort of like they were carrying the pack. Then I made a 'come hither' motion with the sleeve of the dress to the skirt-chair and blouse-chair.

Seline made several wrong guesses before she figured it out. "You mean... Pappa can come with me? But Beast said he couldn't visit."

Right. He had said that when she'd first arrived. I peered in the pack for inspiration, but it was almost empty. After thinking another few moments, I opened the door to the common room.

"Oh dear. Claudette, I don't think—"

I'd already slipped into the noisy, people-filled room. I knew better than to be caught. Seline hovered anxiously at the door behind, trying to look merely curious, but she had no prayer of knowing where I'd gone to. I found my way to the kitchens, stole what I needed, and returned with her still hovering-but-not-hovering near the door.

Zara jumped out of the chair when the door shut in Seline's face, and she gasped when a stream of flour poured onto the table from nowhere.

"You get used to it," Seline said with a small smile. She watched me doodle. "Ah. Yes. I suppose that is true."

I'd crudely made two faces: a fanged frowny face, and a fanged smiley face.

"Is that supposed to be the beast?" Zara said, pointing.

"Pappa can live with us at the castle," Seline said with the confidence of a fortune teller. "He forbade it before, but as I said, Beast has changed. Estelle can come, too. And her daughter."

I brushed flour from my fingers, triumphant. Gautier had told me to do whatever I needed, so I figured dragging the father and the rat would be fine. The spell would end one way or another, as soon as Gautier asked Seline to marry him.

But Zara stared at my flour-beasts and shook her head. "You'll never convince Estelle. Flour appearing out of nowhere is unsettling. Harmless, but unsettling, and Pappa's stories have grown... creative."

Seline's smile faded. "I didn't think of that." Then, to the flour-beasts. "She is right. Estelle fears magic. She even hated the mummers at the fairs, and those were simple tricks with no magic at all. Estelle craves the finery at the castle, but not even jewels will make her go somewhere enchanted."

A knock sounded. Zara's husband, Mal, entered. His stomach had a slight pudge, but his face held more than a slight amount of cheerfulness. "Zara, the children want Mama songs for bedtime. Seline, have you had anything to—what are you two doing?"

He'd caught sight of the clothed chairs and the piles of flour.

Zara stood and took his arm. "I'll explain. Seline, I'll send two bowls of stew and get you a key to a room."

The door closed on Mal repeating, *two?*

Seline sighed and began to fold the blouse. "It was a good idea, Claudette, but..." She shook her head and shoved the clothing in the pack. "Pappa probably wouldn't have gone, either. Not when two months makes him lose two years of his grandchildren's lives."

I watched her fold up the skirt with melancholy. "You only need to be back for a minute. How can I explain that to you?"

I doubted the curse would let me draw a clock pointing to a beast with x's for eyes. Nor Seline at a castle with a beast turning into a man. Not that my doodle skills were that strong. Still. I tried lifting a hand, just to see. The curse wouldn't let me budge.

With a sigh, I changed my mind. My muscles relaxed, and I swept my fingers through the flour, erasing both Beast's angry and happy faces.

CHAPTER 29

Time passed quickly for Seline, but the minutes stretched like a lingering illness for me. Seline helped Zara with the inn and the children, and she couldn't avoid visiting the villagers. Her family had told everyone that she had gone to live with a rich uncle who needed a companion for his daughter. The villagers fished for gossip about this elusive uncle, who resembled Beast more and more as she lied. The adored daughter in Seline's stories resembled me. Seline spent as little time as she could at these awkward visits, but there were many. I went with her, alert for something to help convince her to return in time, but the idle chatter only made me restless. Life flowed in the village, with births and deaths and gossip. Life that had passed Seline.

The third afternoon, after returning to the cottage following one such visit, I spied a familiar sight: saddlebags at the edge of the forest. A reminder. A pleading. I alerted Seline and she brought them inside.

Estelle sat with Reynaud in his room. Color had returned to his cheeks. He remained in bed, still not walking, but he sat up without assistance and moved without coughing. Estelle scowled at Seline as she entered the room.

"Don't clomp around," she said, though Seline never clomped. "I just convinced Natalie to nap. The last thing I need is you waking her up before she's ready."

Seline ignored her.

Reynaud eyed the saddlebags slung over Seline's shoulder. "He cannot buy you from me."

Estelle brightened but squashed it with more scowling. She did not, however, hesitate to open the bags once Seline set them on the bed. She began pulling out gold, spices, and tea. Linen, satin. Along with a surprise: two beautiful dolls and a bag of marbles.

Estelle paled, and I smacked my forehead. *Gautier. That's creepy, not thoughtful!*

But the magic mirror did not have sound, and with the differences in the flow of time, how could he see everything? He wouldn't know of Estelle's fear. Still, it was impressive he managed to assemble the gifts at all, since it'd only been a few hours at the castle.

"Pappa, he's not buying me," Seline said. "These are gifts. Beast is good and generous. I've told you that."

Estelle slipped a doll under her arm. Her eyes shifted from the fine linen to Seline's brown skirt. Drab as it was, the threads were finely woven. She sneered. "Generous, as long as you don't want a flower."

Reynaud pushed away the gifts within his reach. "You are worth more than this."

Estelle gritted her teeth and gave a toothy smile. "Pappa's right. Why can't your generous beast let you stay a full week? That is a civilized length for a visit."

"Beast said five days," Seline said.

"There you go, Pappa. *Beast says*." Estelle tucked the linen under her arm with the doll.

Seline cringed at the look of pain Reynaud gave her. I reached out and touched her elbow, giving a faint squeeze for strength. I couldn't have them bully her.

"I promised," Seline said as Estelle spirited the treasures to her own room.

"And if you don't go back?" Reynaud said. He gestured to the remaining doll and the marbles: gifts for Zara's children. "Is he going to come snatch you from us as easily as he left these?"

"No," Seline said. I rejoiced at the confidence in her voice. "Beast respects me. He won't force me."

"There are different kinds of manipulation," Reynaud said as Estelle returned. "Gifts cause guilt. The toys mean he watches. Does that not bother you, little gem? He knows about your life. Our lives."

"He's enchanted you," Estelle said as she flopped in the bedside chair.

Seline stiffened. "What do you mean?"

A glint entered Estelle's eyes. "There is no castle."

"I was there." Seline waved her hand to the window ajar to let in fresh air. "Pappa was there."

"Was he?" Estelle raised her eyebrows and nodded at their father.

He scratched his head. "I think I was there."

Wariness crept up my spine. What was Estelle up to?

Seline picked up a carved box full of tea and shook it at them. "Where did this come from? Where have I *been* for two years?"

"You think you've been at a castle, but magic can addle a mind," Estelle said. "Like in those fairy stories you enjoy so much. You know, where a mansion turns out to be a hovel, that type of thing."

"I'm not addled."

"Estelle and I discussed it last night," Reynaud said. He sent a glance to his middle daughter, scratching his head again. "If you ask the villagers, none of them know of a castle."

"A castle shouldn't be difficult to miss," Estelle said.

"Well... it is under a spell," Seline said slowly as she lowered the box.

"Precisely," Estelle said. "It's enchanted. So what, really, are you sure of? This beast has bedazzled you. The life you speak of at the castle, it's all an illusion."

I shifted the box, barely a nudge, under Seline's resting fingers. "Next Estelle will say we servants are evil spirits."

Reynaud spoke, more gently than her sister. "The magic made you believe two years were only two months. It's not a large stretch to wonder if the magic has made you believe other falsehoods."

"Because it was two months!" I said. "Two months, and two years! At the same time." I stamped my foot in frustration, and stamped again because, despite the hardwood, my shoe made no sound.

"It seems to me," Estelle said, "the people who grew up here should know about a cursed castle."

"Or maybe it's cursed so that people *won't* know and help us," I spat at her. "Why don't I pull your hair out? That should convince you I'm real."

Estelle touched her cheek, then moved her hand toward the window. The anger in my words had stirred the air so much she thought it a draft.

"There is a castle," Seline said.

Estelle passed Seline on her way out the door. Her sister didn't notice, but I saw the smirk. She called, over her shoulder. "Suit yourself. You always lived in your imagination, anyway."

"You are the problem," I fumed as I followed Estelle out of the room. She and that smirk sat at the hearthroom table, cleaned by Seline. I loomed uselessly over her. "You like the trinkets. Why not let Seline return? Then you don't have to share."

Estelle stared through me as she took in the room. The smirk vanished and she spoke so low, I could barely hear. "She gets everything. Beauty. Riches. Father... She may be bespelled, but she doesn't do dishes."

"As if you wash dishes," I said. The clean ones on the shelf were all Seline's doing. "That's the issue, is it? Jealousy. You're not pampered, so she can't be."

Estelle didn't mumble anything else.

I paced between the table and the hearth. All my problems centered on Estelle. Without her, Reynaud could live with Zara. If his worry for Seline was too great, he could come to the castle. Neither was an option as long as Estelle behaved like a self-important rat.

"Fortunately for you, I am not Madame," I said. "Otherwise I'd make you get lost in the woods, or worse."

A babe's cry sounded through the crack of a door. Estelle squeezed her eyes shut and wiped a tear from her eye. Then she went to tend her daughter.

I stayed in the hearthroom. *How do I do it? How do I convince Seline to leave?* I couldn't clobber her and drag her to the castle. Well, I could. But it didn't seem like the way to get a favorable answer from her. Besides, if she wanted to stay, that meant she loved her family more than Beast. Right? He had told her it would be bad, her staying away. To ignore his warning... It'd mean, in the end, her love wouldn't have been strong enough to break the spell, anyway.

I waited outside, frustrated. Never had I felt so helpless. Never had I felt so hopeless. The dimming forest waited with me, looking as if it had been blighted by Sibyla.

I wish to die with you.

I closed my eyes, dwelling on Gautier's words. "You may get your wish."

He'd be standing in the Rose Garden by now. Sunset, likely. The last sunset before an endless night. The roses, afire with tones of orange and pink, the air heady with scent in the last of the day's warmth. He'd be pacing, trampling any petal that had fallen, trying to make himself fall in love...

Seline came outside, and I opened my eyes. She wore a cloak borrowed from Zara, yet she shivered at the slate-gray sky. "Claudette? You are here? You are real?"

Such words, sharper than any dagger. I tugged on her cloak.

She gave the air a weak smile. "I don't believe them, Pappa and Estelle. Your kindness cannot be feigned."

"Then why did you wonder if I were real?" I asked, never to be answered.

"Let's get going before darkness falls," she said.



W on the path to the village. Usually, when we walked, I watched her for any hint of our future. This time, however, the future seemed more or less decided.

For the first time, I savored my surroundings. After all, it was my last winter.

I took in a deep gulp of the crisp air, noticing how it filled my lungs and cleared my head. I took a moment to appreciate the shadows in the trees, as much as I could with enchanted eyesight. The leaves crunched underfoot, a sound I hadn't heard in a decade, and squirrels made such a ruckus in them that I almost laughed. Almost. It had been a decade, after all, since I'd heard *life*. I'd never hear it again.

We came to a juncture where the cottage's thin path met another to form a wider road. A mound of rocks, entirely covered with browned moss stood—

I halted as Seline continued down the main road. The shape of the stone pile... I *remembered* it. There had also been an oak there. No oak now, only a large, half-rotted stump. The ghost of an oak tree.

Because it's been a hundred years.

I'd been here, a hundred years earlier, going to the village with Marie, back when the village had been vibrant and bustling because of the castle, just a short way down a wide, smooth road. I quivered with excitement, spinning around, because *there*, one hundred years ago, I'd taken that spindly path with Marie to see —

"You need to come this way," I said as I lunged forward and grabbed Seline's cloak. She nearly toppled to the ground and yelped. I grabbed her elbow to steady her, full of more focus than I'd ever felt. "Come on. Hurry!"

"Claudette! What's gotten into you? Why—I'm coming, I'm coming—is this even a path?" She stumbled and found her footing. "Wait. I remember. This goes to the widow Martin's, doesn't it?"

Only a few more minutes of hurry and we were there. A stone house covered entirely by brittle ivy husks watched as I went brazenly to the knocker and thudded with abandon.

"*Claudette*," Seline hissed. "I don't know why we are—"

The door creaked open.

Seeing Marie's sister in person was more sobering than seeing her in a mirror, like some moving portrait. My enthusiasm died as I took in Aimee. The chubby-thighed toddler, awkward on her feet, now leaned on a cane to stay upright. She had less hair than she had back then, and it was now all wispy and white and haloing her head. The smooth, perfect skin had gone soft and wrinkly, and her wide eyes now squinted.

Aimee broke into a toothless smile. "My daughter just left to bring stew from the inn. They make us some, you know, every third day, but you are welcome. Welcome to wait for her. Come on, come on. Visitors are so precious. I'll fetch some tea."

"Oh, no. I don't want to be a—thank you." As Aimee turned her back, I shoved Seline forward. She took my herding in her stride and entered the rest of the way by herself. "Let me help you."

Seline took Aimee's elbow, and I got the door. Inside, the home hadn't changed much. It was still a large single room with a hearth and a table at one end, and the beds hidden on the other by a curtain. The curtain had changed color, the patchwork chair cushions had been renewed, and the pottery was glazed differently. But it still felt like Marie's home, cozy if cramped.

"Truly, I do not need tea," Seline said as she nudged the woman toward the chairs. "In fact, I am here to see you, I believe."

I grinned. *Good guess, Seline.*

"Me?" Aimee chuckled, dried leaves for a voice. "A young thing like you to see me?"

"With age comes wisdom and knowledge, grandmother." Seline glanced about, taking in the room. "I need both."

Aimee leaned forward, and her squint deepened. "You're that foreign girl, aren't you? Innkeeper's sister. There's a nice girl, and a good cook, too. She's been sending over meals ever since Raolf died."

"That is Zara," Seline said. A smile ghosted her lips for her sister, but only briefly. "You are right. We are not from here, and so we don't know the area well. Perhaps you could tell me if there's a castle nearby?"

The woman blinked. "Castle?"

Seline's shoulders drooped with disappointment. "So there is no—" Her lips thinned. I'd disturbed the curtains to the sleeping area. She shook her head at me, ever so slightly, telling me with shifting eyes to get back to the chairs.

I ignored her.

Behind the curtains, I found the chests at the foot of the bed, right where they'd been when they'd belonged to another generation. I opened the first, finding colorful clothes and a few keepsakes. A quick peek in the other: shawls. That had to be Aimee's. Old women were always cold. I dove in.

"Please, please let her still have them," I murmured. I pawed through clothing, getting to a layer of sentimental carvings and a tiny portrait of a young man and... a stack of yellow papers tied with a yellowed ribbon.

"What about the woods?" Seline was saying when I reentered.

"Before your family took the old cottage, we were the only ones willing to live this deep. If you walk into the woods, you get lost and suddenly..." Aimee made flapping motions with her hands. "Suddenly, you're out. Every once in a while a young hunter thinks he's better than the rest, but they never find their way. Never."

"Do you think it's mag—" Seline jumped to her feet. I'd waved the bundle above Aimee's head. "Ahem. Um. May I ask about these?"

She fetched the letters from the table where I'd set them outside Aimee's sight. The old woman twisted.

"Marie's letters!" she said with a gasp. "You found them!"

Seline froze. "Marie?"

"My sister!" Aimee held out her hand. Seline gave her the bundle, and Aimee beamed at them. "Marie worked as a chambermaid in the castle. She sent me these when I was a wee thing. That's why I learned to read, you know."

Seline felt around behind her for the chair's arm and lowered herself into the seat. "Marie... is your... sister."

"I was the surprise," Aimee said with a chuckle as she began to untie the bundle. "Marie was, oh, seventeen? Eighteen? When I was born. Mother thought she wasn't able to have another child."

"And Marie, you said she worked at the castle?"

Aimee looked up from the bundle. For a heart-stopping second, she blinked. "Castle?"

"You just said she was a chambermaid." Seline pointed at Aimee's lap.

She looked down, and joy lit her face anew. "My letters! I don't even remember picking them up! My sister wrote them when she worked at the castle."

Seline swallowed. "May I read them?"

"Could you?" Aimee held them out with a shaking hand. "Aloud? My eyes are so dim, these days."

Carefully, for the old paper crackled where it had been folded, Seline opened the first and read.

My old life unfolded before me. No, Marie's life. I had been tucked away, out of sight, cleaning like a shadow. These letters spoke of finery and gossip and celebration, for Marie had cared for the noblewomen whenever the castle became full. She waited on the ladies during feasts, prepped them for balls, cleaned their rooms while they stayed.

One after another, Seline read. Marie had penned so many: simple and short, full of wonder. They were letters written to a child, all sparkle and happiness. She'd gone into detail about the luxurious lives she'd witnessed and had taken pains to explain what someone of the castle might not understand.

There was a ball last week. The Lady of the Keys had us scurrying like mice to get the South Hall decorated in time... Someday, I hope you can visit me, if even for a few hours. The upper maid owes me a favor so surely she will give me time to show you around. First, we'll see the library. It is so enormous! The librarian lets me borrow books sometimes. There's a green chair by the window, out of sight, where I like to read...

"Claudette was so mad yesterday," Seline read. "Betty teased her, so she dumped a bucket of soapy water on her head, right there in the servant's hall! Oh dear, but that does sound like Claudette. Betty should have known better."

Aimee chuckled. "There is a lot of Claudette. She's a spirited girl, Marie's best..." She trailed off as she turned to the window. Presently, she shook herself. "Excuse me, dear, I must have nodded off. You were saying?"

Seline lifted the paper. "I was reading—"

"My letters! You found them!" With a tremble that shivered through her body, Aimee pushed herself to standing. She grabbed her cane so she could hobble closer. "Marie wrote them to me. I was only two—"

"How old are you now?"

Aimee's brow furrowed. She looked around the old stone room as if it might have the answer. "Well. The years go by, but... Yes. I do believe I'm over one hundred now. Not around much longer, I'm afraid. I expect to sleep any day now."

Seline's eyes popped open. She glanced at the letter. "What happened? To Marie?"

"My sister? Why she..." Aimee swayed. Seline dropped the paper and caught the frail woman before she swooned. "Oh my. Forgive me dear, this happens I... You were asking about my sister..."

Seline helped her into the chair. "No matter."

"My mind, it comes and goes," Aimee said as she stared into the fire. "I remember. I had a sister. Mother spoke of her. But I cannot remember."

Seline kissed the old woman's forehead. Aimee beamed up at her, muttering about her being a sweet girl, so kind to visit someone as old as she.

Seline managed a farewell, and we left the house and met the juncture just as the younger Widow Martin reached it with a covered basket. By then the wind howled and darkness swallowed the land, so we passed without speaking. Only outside the inn, in the feeble glow of a single cracked window, did Seline halt.

She pulled something from her cloak: the letters. She shook them in the air. "Her Marie is our Marie, isn't she?" Laughter burst through the ajar shutters, and Seline brought the paper close to the light. "Listen to this: 'Our prince has such a temper! The king sent a gift from some princess, and he threw it against the wall! I am sure he will grow into a fine young man, however. They say he plays piano with beauty. If he has music in his heart, I am sure his temper will calm as he gets older.'"

Wind gusted, snapping the shutter closed, and Seline rushed to pull the brittle paper back into the safety of her cloak. "Beast was once a prince. Something happened, something terrible. That's why he bullied Pappa. He needed help, but the magic keeps him from directly saying what he needs."

Clever, clever Seline. Bless Aimee for keeping those letters for a lifetime.

Her breath came out in puffs, and she huddled next to the inn's wall for warmth. "Oh, Claudette! If only you had met Beast earlier. Pappa would be much more understanding of a *nice* beast. For I must go back, mustn't I? There's something I must do. And it happens when I go back."

I tried to tug yes, but I stayed frozen as if the wind, too, had bullied me into a cringing lump. It was Sibyla's magic, preventing me, just as it had blanked poor Aimee's memory whenever she looked away from the letters.

Seline straightened, despite the wind. "Widow Martin, she said she was over one hundred years old. Beast told me you were nineteen or so."

With concentration, I reached into the folds of her cloak and found her hand. She gripped mine in return and stroked the back.

"You *are* young. Time stopped for you and Marie." Another muffled burst of laughter, and Seline shivered. She needed warmth soon. "I was not confused by magic. Two months in the castle really was two years here."

She knew enough. I firmed my grip on her hand and pulled her toward the door. She shook terribly with cold. I tugged on her sleeve, toward the inn.

Seline didn't budge. "If I stay an extra day, that's only a few hours at the castle. Beast said that midnight may be safer. I don't have an extra day. You don't have a few more hours."

Before my eyes, Seline changed. All the uncertainty she'd felt, the shock at finding her family altered, it all vanished like snow in the sun. She was *Seline* again, a young woman full of light and hope and love. She'd made a decision. Beast, over her father.

Now it depends on her answer. If she says yes. And if she loves him.

One worry gone, so many left.



W Mal greeted her in the common room, saying Zara was busy in the kitchen and he'd bring us some supper. She made her way through the curious villagers, many still fishing for gossip, a few genuinely wanting a report on Reynaud. Finally we made it to the back room. Mal joined us with two steaming bowls of stew.

"You seem different," he said after a moment of watching her eat. "There's a spark back in your eyes. I haven't seen it since you left."

"Zara always said worry didn't suit me." She blew on a potato and raised an eyebrow at him. "Mal, you were born in here, right? Who is your king?"

He blinked. "My king? Why he's..." Mal's eyes went out of focus, and he frowned.

"That's what I thought." At her words, he shook himself, disoriented. I doubted he would remember the question. Seline scooped another bite. "I've made up my mind. I will return to Beast as promised, and I will ask him to allow Pappa to stay at the castle."

Mal nodded. "Even if Reynaud cannot, it will greatly relieve his mind if he can visit. I hope he moves, though. Zara and I are too busy with the inn and children to

keep an eye on him. And he'll be happier at the castle with you."

"No, he will not."

We all turned. Estelle stood in the doorway to the common room, a package in her arms. We hadn't even heard the door open. I hastily let go of my spoon, grateful it was only a finger's width above the bowl. Maybe Mal could claim it as his.

Estelle came closer, slamming the bag on the table. A doll's arm flopped out and a marble skittered. "How *dare* you. Threatening to take Pappa away!"

Seline took a deep breath. "Estelle, I am not *taking* him away. I'm giving him, and you, options. There's no need to be upset. I'm not even sure it's possible. I have not discussed it with Beast, nor with Pappa."

"Nor with me!"

Mal stood to put a hand on Estelle's arm. She shook it off.

"You have his heart," Estelle said to Seline. "Is that not enough? I have cared for him for two years. *For two years*. And it's still about you, you, you."

"Stell, that's not true," Mal said. "Reynaud loves all three of you, in different ways."

Estelle rounded on him. "You have no idea! Zara has you and the children and the inn, while all I have is a sniveling girl who is completely like her father!" Estelle's hands balled into fists as her eyes glistened. "Now you're taking away the only thing I love."

"No one's taking anyone," Seline said. She stood, completely calm. "If Pappa is allowed to *choose* to come, you may choose as well."

Estelle took a step back, and her eyes raked across her sister as if she were viewing trash. "So I can be bewitched like you? Pappa is disappointed in *me*, but you're the one catering to something not even human."

I shot to my feet to punch her, but Seline slapped her first. Mal nodded in approval, earning my love forever.

"You do not speak of Beast in that way," Seline shook with anger. "You know nothing but your own vanity and pride. Everything you give to Pappa, to anyone, is so they will worship and adore you. Beast gives out of love, and that makes him more human than you."

"You admit it!" Estelle said, shrill. "You're his whore!"

Seline slapped her again. Mal stood frozen, arms folded.

"I didn't say he loves me," Seline said. "I said that he loves. Mal, get a room ready for Pappa. He will live with you until I can talk to Beast."

Mal moved to the door. "I know just the room."

"No! No! You will not take him! Pappa will stay with me. He wouldn't move here before." Estelle spread her arms to block the way to the door.

"He will," Seline said. "If it is my only request of him before I leave, he will."

I saw everything in slow motion, or perhaps it was my enchanted senses.

Mal turned his back.

Seline tilted her head, the first motion in a dismissal.

Estelle stiffened, her hands claw-like, the nails sharp points.

I saw her tense to leap.

I grabbed Seline's blouse and pulled her back, propelling myself into Estelle's lunge.

Lady Alys had expected me. Estelle did not. I shouldered her from the side, and she slammed against the wall before falling to the ground.

The other visible humans gaped.

"What happened?" Mal said just as Estelle began to shriek.

"She tried to attack me," Seline said, her eyes wide. "Claudette got her first."

Two villagers rushed into the room at Estelle's cries.

"Witch! Witch!" Estelle screamed, pointing at Seline.

The two men, both farmers by their dress and bulk, cocked their heads at Mal. "She finally lost it, eh?" one said.

Mal shared a look with Seline, and nodded. "Help me take Estelle home. We're going to bring Reynaud back here."

"Prob'ly best. Come on, girl." The men grunted and scooped up Estelle.

"No! She pushed me without her hands. I am not crazy! She's a witch! There's a beast—I will not let you take him from me!"

She continued to shriek as they dragged her through the common room. I shut the door.

"Maybe this will force her to..." Seline slumped to the table. "I didn't want it to go like this. But I cannot control her, can I?"

Not unless she wanted to become Madame. I smoothed her hair.

"I need to see Pappa safely settled here before we leave. He can return to Estelle once he's healthy. Unless... I do hope Pappa can come live with me." She turned, searching for a girl she had no hope of seeing. "Thank you. I'm sorry you needed to do that. Estelle has hated me for a long, long time." She gave me a weary smile. "I had better tell Zara what happened so she can prepare somewhere for Pappa. Two more days. I just have to get through two more days, then we'll be home. You'll have your piano, I'll have my bubble baths, and we both will have our Beast."

If we don't die.

CHAPTER 30

S ometime during the trek to the cottage, Estelle gave up. That's what the men said. She went meek and quiet and mournful, docile as a fawn. She sat to the side with a false smile and reassuring words as they bundled up Reynaud. By the time they returned the next morning for Reynaud's things, she'd turned helpful with everything already packed up for him. Mal was impressed, Seline was surprised, and Zara relieved.

I knew better. Estelle and Lady Marguerite came from the same tin of rancid polish. Clever enough to know when to retreat, proud enough to sneer at defeat. While the sisters hoped for a brighter future with Estelle, I hoped for an attack too late.

Reynaud slept in one of the inn's guest rooms overnight. The next day, Mal ordered a small storeroom emptied so Reynaud wouldn't have to climb stairs. The foodstuffs and supplies had been emptied out by late morning and filled with Reynaud's belongings. He sat on the bed, staring at the cramped space. Being a storeroom, there wasn't a window, and it smelled of earth and flour and spices.

"It's only for a while," Seline said as she sat beside him on the mattress. I squished myself into the only open spot, minding the wall sconce. "Once you're stronger, you can move back to Estelle's. If you like."

He breathed deep, lungs clear. "Estelle has not been herself, lately."

"No. I am afraid she has not."

He smiled the smile of a man resigned to an unfortunate fate. "I thought, if I stayed with her, she'd come out of it. My poor child. So much bitterness for such a young heart."

Seline squeezed his hand. "Estelle won't be happy until she looks past herself, Pappa."

"I was too harsh on her when she... I thought maybe Natalie would..." He let out a ragged breath. "She's terrible to that child."

"You can't blame yourself. You cannot change someone who does not want to be changed." She gestured to the door. "Shall we sit in the common room? By the front window? The sun is shining today."

Reynaud didn't budge. He whispered, hoarse. "How much can an old man take? How can you leave me tomorrow night with all that has happened?"

"Pappa. I told you. Beast needs me."

Reynaud must have caught the new resolve in her voice, for his head jerked up. He peered at her. "This beast matters more than your flesh and blood?"

Seline flinched, but her chin stayed high. "Pappa, I love you, and I love my sisters. But you have chosen your lives. It's time I choose mine."

"You are choosing—"

"*Choosing?*" Seline said. "Do you remember how restless I was when I was younger? How I threatened—"

"To dress like a boy and join a crew. Ah, I had forgotten." His wrinkles deepened as he smiled at the memory. "You would have made a terrible sailor, my little gem."

"I know. But that doesn't change how I felt." She sighed, her hand caressing one of the empty shelves. "It's hard to explain. My heart, it felt... lost. Alone. Drifting without purpose. I've never had many friends."

I believed her. She was too beautiful. Too many girls would hate her, and too many men would woo her for the wrong reasons.

Reynaud studied her. "You are saying, then, that you are happy. At the castle."

"Yes." The simple word, sweeter than a sigh, and jubilant. "I am happy. Beast and Claudette are the dearest friends I've ever had. I could not live with myself if they suffered because I failed to even try to help him. I love them, Pappa."

I gasped. A tickling sensation, like wet skin drying in summer air, prickled all over my body. I laughed aloud, so much that the flame in the sconce flickered. *I love them.* Madame, with all her clever scheming, had never said what kind of love Seline needed to feel for Beast.

The last of the illness seemed to leave Reynaud. He turned stronger, clear eyed. He covered Seline's hand with his own and leaned over to kiss her cheek. "Then I will let you go. I am proud of you. I don't understand—I cannot reconcile my beast with yours—but I am proud to call such a determined young woman my daughter."

She flung her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "Thank you."

I knew, then, that she would do it. Gautier would ask her to marry him. She'd recognize it as the key. She'd pause and think, about him and about me, and she'd say yes. She'd do it for love. Not romantic love—the love between a woman and a man—but love grown from the deepest friendship.

I am not sure that will be enough, Gautier had said to me. He had known, all along, how Seline loved him.

Would it be enough for Sibyla? It partly depended on Gautier's reasons for the proposal. Would it be out of duty? Duty to the castle, to his responsibilities as the prince, to those whose lives he ruined? Or would his proposal be from love? Love that he discovered in these final hours, absence making his heart fond...

Love for me, to keep me from dying.

Gautier cared enough to not want me to die, but... I swallowed against a hard lump. In the end, it didn't matter who loved whom or how. Nothing mattered but Sibyla's opinion.

Sibyla has made it so a guttersnipe cannot break the spell. I spoke my love aloud, and nothing happened.

Seline had pulled away from Reynaud and was now telling him of her plans for him to join her at the castle. "You'll have fine clothes, rich meals. You'll grow strong enough to ride, and I can read to you as you do your wood carvings. My friend, she is learning to play the piano, and we can dance together."

He smiled a smile that reached his eyes, and I realized that Seline had gotten her inner light from her father. "It's the life we used to live."

"Better. No cantankerous money-changers trying to swindle you." He chuckled at that. She hesitated. "You'd enjoy Beast's company, too. He is a good man, one I think you will come to respect."

His mirth changed into curiosity. "Man?"

"Under the ghastly appearance, he is a man. Can you blame him for his actions when you first came to the castle? I fear he was half mad with despair." She looked

warmly at the empty space in the room. "He is so very different now."

"Then, go. You change the monster back into a man, and I will be the first to shake his hand." Reynaud kissed her forehead. "The night you leave, we must throw a goodbye party. Family only. Toast you to good fortune and fair weather, as we used to with each new ship."

"I would like that." Seline brushed away a lock of hair which had plastered to her cheek from tears of happiness. "Just remember, I absolutely must leave by midnight."

CHAPTER 31

With the time remaining, Seline settled her father's affairs. The bounty from two years earlier had been spent quickly with Estelle's desires. Seline squared the debts and made vague promises to ensure her father's care, while avoiding questions about her uncle and disarming the flirtations of those who wanted her to stay.

I followed her from place to place, sick with anticipation. As the last day lengthened, my eyes kept darting to the sky. Thick, heavy clouds kept the world a white-gray. The air smelled of snow. By supper, it even overcame the baking bread and roasting meat of the inn. More people crowded the common room than usual, having heard that the beautiful, strange daughter of Reynaud's was to leave already. Had anyone seen her carriage? No, she had simply appeared. Old ones nodded over their pipes. *Reynaud's cottage is deep in the woods, and strange things have always happened there.*

Seline smiled and laughed her way through it all, but a line of worry stayed on her brow. She glanced at candles, marking the time. Later, and later, and later.

"Gerard, can you carry the Chandler to his wife?" Mal asked a large man as he wiped down tables. The last patrons lingered, most of them drunk.

"Busy night," Gerard said. He hefted the red-cheeked Chandler to his feet.

Someone near the door swore. "Looks like it's finally snowing."

Zara pushed wide the shutters of a nearby window. "It's light. Still..." She shot a glance toward her husband, and he hastened the rest of the patrons out the door.

When the children were long in bed, and the adults had assembled in the private room, Zara covered the worn table with a linen cloth from Beast and placed a silver candelabra—also from the castle—to add extra light. Mal brought in stemmed glasses and a bottle of wine, while Zara piled presents at the opposite end of the table.

Mal whistled low as Seline entered the room. "I didn't know I had royalty at my inn. I should have given you a bigger room."

Seline flourished the skirt of her green silk gown. I'd even done up her hair, her dark waves formed into ringlets and held by combs studded with emeralds. "You should see Claudette's dress."

I grimaced. I wore a deep purple satin with gold trim. Seline had packed it while I was with Gautier. She had even slipped in a matching amethyst necklace and earrings. Who knew where she'd found such things, but they fit better than anything I had ever worn. I suspected she had worked with a certain chambermaid to get the right measurements to the seamstress.

Mal's eyes searched empty corners at my name. Reynaud frowned. "Claudette?" "Never mind, Pappa."

Zara gestured to the small pile of packages. "These aren't as fine as the things you brought, but maybe they'll remind you of us."

Seline smiled. As she reached for the first parcel, the door to the common room opened. She stiffened. So did I.

Estelle, eyes puffy and red, regarded the room with her nose in the air.

"Ah, you made it," Reynaud said. All eyes turned on him. He cleared his throat. "Estelle's made mistakes, but she's still your sister and my daughter. I invited her."

She didn't carry any presents. That made me glad. I wouldn't have to burn anything later.

"Have a seat, Stell," Mal said. She did, beside the glasses for they were the farthest from the presents. Everyone tried not to look at her. "Go on, Seline. Open your first gift."

The minutes crawled. Seline uncovered a small sampler with a sweet saying about family. "It's not grand because you didn't give me enough time," Zara said. There was a tiny carved boat of her father's first ship. Present after present, humble but loving, from the family and from the closest friends of her life before.

Seline picked up the last box.

"It should go back to where it belongs," Reynaud said.

"Back where it..." Seline inhaled slightly, and I smelled it, too. Rose. "It's still alive?"

"Beautiful as the day I took it."

Estelle's harsh voice shattered our awe. "I threw that out."

"I found it and gave it to Mal for safekeeping," Reynaud said, his voice tight. "Something bathed in magic, so precious to its owner, is not rubbish. As I told you. Go on, Seline. Open it."

She removed the lid and paled. "Oh, no."

I scrambled to look over her shoulder, ignoring the fact that my arm passed through Zara.

The end had begun.

The rose still lay suspended as if in the height of its bloom, open and bestowing grace upon the world. The purple petals still resembled brushed velvet, threaded with veins of gold. But the tip of each petal had begun to blacken and curl.

"It's dying." Seline snapped the lid closed. "I must go."

"We still have time," I said, but I agreed. If I carried some of the packages, would Reynaud faint? Estelle would likely start screaming. It might be worth it if someone slapped her again.

"The wine," Reynaud said. "We must toast her."

Estelle smirked. "There's no time, Pappa. She says she has to go. Get back to her Beast."

Reynaud appealed to Zara and Mal. "We *must* toast her. Good luck for new beginnings."

"I can stay a few minutes longer," Seline said. "But I must go as soon as we're done."

Mal pushed aside the wrappings that had drifted near the wine glasses. "I thought I brought the wine from the cellar."

Estelle made a disgusted sound. Her chair clattered as she pushed herself up. "I'll get it. No one wants me here, anyway."

Tension filled the room when no one objected to her choice of words. Estelle snorted as she left, and everyone waited, anxious. In moments, she returned, with a bottle of wine in hand. She slammed it on the table and uncorked it almost in the same motion.

"Thanks, Stell," Mal said. He poured the wine into five glasses, then frowned. He had not planned on Estelle. We were six if I were included. Seline shook her head. A floating wine glass would only upset Estelle more. He set down the bottle and passed drinks to the visible people.

"To Seline," Reynaud said. For a moment I saw a dark-haired youth, strong and certain and adventurous. "May she sail into prosperity and peace, bringing riches everywhere she goes. I will miss you, little gem, but I take comfort in the fact that you are cared for and loved."

"To Seline." Glasses chinked, tipped back.

Estelle put hers down without drinking.

Seline swallowed half before the line on her forehead grew deeper. She set the glass down with impatience and grabbed the box with the rose. "I must go. I have this terrible feeling."

"Rightly so," Zara said as she eyed the box. "I watched Pappa put the rose in there this morning. There was nothing wrong with it then."

"Go." Reynaud put a hand to his mouth and covered a yawn. "There is no more to be said."

Mal stood, fell back into his seat. Zara blinked at him, squeezed her eyes shut, and peered at him again. She reached for the bottle. Her hand brushed against it, tipping it, and the bottle made a terrible echoing sound as it struck the floor.

I stared with horror. Everyone moved as if drunk, only worse. Drunk people, in their own spirited haze, at least understood the world around them.

"Something's wrong," Seline said, her words slow and labored.

Estelle began to giggle. She stood, unaffected, and snatched the bottle. "You look much too tired to travel, dear sister. You should wait until morning. Or afternoon. Anyway, you'll be too late to help your beast. I hope you like that dress, because it's the last fancy one you'll ever have."

Estelle drugged them. Mal began to snore. Reynaud slipped backward in his chair. *The rat drugged her entire family.*

Estelle patted her father's cheek. "You'll move back in with me, and you'll be happy. You'll see."

As she put her hand on the handle to the common room, I concentrated. It didn't take much effort. Anger gave me tremendous focus. I grabbed Estelle's shoulder, spun her around, and punched her. She crumpled to the floor, every bit as unconscious as the rest of them. But in a much more satisfying way.

"Seline," I said, leaving the traitor on the ground. My lady slumped in her chair. I pulled on her hands. "Seline, it's almost midnight. We need to leave."

"Claudette." Her breath rasped. "I cannot move."

I tried tugging her to her feet. In her drugged state, carrying a human-sized bag of potatoes was easier. "This can't be happening. Come on, Seline. Try."

She did. This time she made it halfway to her feet, but only because she was half draped upon me. She grunted. "You cannot carry me the entire way."

I eased her back into the chair. Sunrise, Gautier had said. It was winter, and we had hours until sunrise. Had he considered that? Did he mean the castle's sunrise, or hers? Estelle had been confident that everyone would sleep until midday. I eyed Seline's glass, still half full of the crimson liquid.

"Claudette, I am sorry." A haze covered her eyes, but she struggled to stay conscious. Around us, her family snored.

I slipped the ring out of my pocket and hooked my arm around hers. If it worked, maybe I could Summon Marie to help me carry her to the garden. I twisted it once. Twice. Thrice. *We're too far away from the forest.* Panic made it hard to

breathe.

“Beast said it would be bad. How bad?”

My tears fell onto her arm.

“You will die,” she whispered in horror. “Leave me. You must go to him.”

“I have to take you,” I said. Maybe I could find a wheelbarrow or a cart. I’d scoot her, chair and all, to the door, and from there—

“You have to go. Break the spell.”

“I cannot,” I said.

“You must try.”

“Sibyla never meant for—you can hear me?”

“Yes,” she said. By her unfocused gaze, I knew she couldn’t see me, but she had answered my question. Was it the drugs which let her hear me, taking her closer to dreams than reality? Or was it the enchantment, already fading? “You must *try*, Claudette. He loves you.”

My heart flopped. “He loves me?”

“Desperately. Can you not tell?” Her speech was starting to slur. I hung on each word she said. “He loves you so deeply that it terrifies him that you may not return his love. Do you? Do you love him?”

I swallowed. “I do. But the spell—Sibyla changed his appearance and tangled the wood. I know what he is, it’s too easy for one of the castle to love him—”

Seline laughed, a butterfly’s whisper. “Is it? The beast I met... wasn’t very agreeable... you must have been brazen. You upset him so...”

A spark of hope lit in my chest. Seline had a point. How angry I had been at him, how disgusted by his arrogance and lack of manners. All of us in the castle looked down on him or feared him, or both. Sibyla never had to bewitch us. Her curse gave us reason to resent him, not to mention worsening his already prickly temper.

“Tell him, so he knows.” Seline’s eyes closed, and I thought I’d lost her. Her mouth cracked open. “Before... too late. Love should... should not go... unconfessed.”

She slipped into unconsciousness.

Tears wet my cheeks. The end was coming. The rose was dying. The rose that, in myth, would bloom until the end of the kingdom. Cutting the stem had not killed it.

My silence will.

The day I had realized my love for Gautier, the spell had not ended. I had told myself it was because I was a servant. I was not worthy, not in Sibyla’s eyes. After all, I was used to others judging me for my birth. In truth, I feared the enchantment continued because Gautier did not love me and that was fear I had not wanted to face.

So I never told him. I loved him, but not completely. Love cannot be fulfilled without risk. Vulnerability was what made love so precious, sweet, and true. I had wrapped Seline around me like a cloak against the winter wind. That’s what Gautier had seen. My seeming faith in Seline, pointing him away from the truth.

I had to let her go.

“Thank you,” I said. I kissed her forehead and slipped the rose’s box from her hands. “You made me see. You broke the spell.”

Estelle moaned as I passed her. I punched her again, effectively silencing her. If she woke before the others, I didn’t want her attacking them in their sleep. I heaved Estelle onto a chair and tied her there with twine from the present wrappings.

It cost me time.

The second I finished the knots, I raced for the inn's door. It opened to a white, swirling world. Even my enchanted vision had difficulty making out surroundings in the blur of white. My first step crunched through ice and then fell into powder nearly up to my knee. I hefted my skirts, leaned into the wind, and forged ahead.

The wind snatched at me, tried to fling me to the ground. It succeeded a few times, pushing me backward into the snow. My eyes soon ached from squinting against the colorless gale. I twisted the ring every few feet, hoping to pull myself out of the icy hell. It never worked. Reynaud's cottage was a ten-minute walk in decent weather. Trudging through snow, fighting wind, flakes stabbed my bare arms like miniature knives.

I shivered.

My reaction to the weather gave me bone-deep chills. "No. Please, Sibyla. It's not sunrise yet. I need the enchantment's protection a little longer."

The air froze my lungs. I flung an arm in front of my face and leaned forward, hastening my steps. Or trying to hasten. The snow snatched a shoe, and rather than take the precious time to find it, I abandoned it in the snow. After a few minutes, my throbbing toes regretted the decision, but I pressed on. The blowing snow meant sometimes my foot fell through powder as deep as my knees, and other times my footfall jarred, for the snow barely covered the ground. My hip screamed with fire at the unevenness. *At least my knife wound has healed.*

Yes. Good thoughts. Good thoughts and good steps and twist the ring and good thoughts again and twist—

The world spun as I fell, face forward, in the absence of wind. My wrists popped as I caught myself. I rolled to my back and blinked, trying to get my eyes to see more than whiteness. Gray replaced it. Slate-gray clouds hung thick in a sky that should have been turning pink with sunrise. The air above me prickled, warmer than in the blizzard, yet too cool. It tasted clammy and clingy, like snow.

I pushed to my feet and hissed at the stabbing in my hip. Gravel bit into my bare foot. Before me stretched the wood. If I squinted, I could make out snow upon the deepest branches. I turned to face a high, stone wall and a wrought-iron gate of lions and roses.

I went to push it open.

Locked.

CHAPTER 32

I shook the iron with all my might, rattling the gate in the hinges loud enough for half the kingdom to hear. “Let me in!”

“Where is Seline?” came Madame’s voice. No sound of keys. She stood on the other side of the gate, unmoving. “What did you do with her?”

The snow melted on my dress, weighing it down and turning it clammy. I shivered again, my body remembering how to do so after ten years. Madame couldn’t see my bedraggled self; she had no idea what I’d gone through. “Seline’s sister drugged her. Please, unlock—”

“And you didn’t drag her here?”

“Through a blizzard? I barely made it here on my own!”

“You had a single task, Claudette. I should have known better. Go back and get her.”

I stared through the bars, at nothing but air that was getting colder by the minute, and the hedges that would blacken if we dallied much longer. “Madame, there is no time. Even if I could find my way to her in the snow, and bring her back before Sibyla’s return, Seline won’t wake up.”

Madame sucked in a breath but did not say anything. I released the bar and took a step back, studying the wall and the gate. I couldn’t climb the stone. Too smooth, too tall. My hip, too sore. Maybe I could climb the decorated iron, but Madame waited on the other side.

“Please,” I said once more. Deep inside, Lady Marguerite was a woman. Wasn’t she? “Unlock the gate. You’ve guessed that I love Gautier. Let me tell him. Let me die beside him.”

Madame didn’t speak.

“I am sorry I failed,” I tried again. “There is nothing more we can do. Seline wanted to return. She loves him, but as a friend. Nothing more. Sibyla would have killed us.”

“You can’t break the spell.” A wind began to blow, raw and ugly as her tone. “Sibyla never would have gone to so much trouble if a simple parlormaid could save us.”

“No. But if we’re to die, at least he can die knowing he’s loved.”

Madame hissed like a stepped-on cat. “By a guttersnipe!”

“Yes.” Tears and desperation threatened to choke me, but I’d be damned to let Madame hear me cry. “Yes, I am, and you are a *servant*, not a queen, and your prince is waiting for death. Unlock the gate.”

Madame muttered something under her breath and keys jangled, but they did not appear. “Give me the ring. My hand is through the bars, beside the lock.”

“The ring?”

"Yes, you simpleton. The ring." She stamped the ground. "I will fetch Seline myself. Hand over the ring to transport me to her."

She didn't understand how the ring worked. It would not take her to Seline. The farthest it traveled was the forest's edge, and then only if there was something strong with magic outside the walls. I held the rose. There was nothing else. "You are not listening to me. There is no way."

"I *Command* you. Claudette, give me the ring."

I braced myself, but nothing happened. No weight, no compulsion. Nothing but the cold wind and, on the horizon, a lightening gray sky.

Nothing I say will make her unlock the gate.

"Give me the ring!" she shouted again. Desperation made her sound crazed.

"No." I gritted my teeth as if I were fighting her Command and spat the words through them. "You. Cannot. Get there. In time."

She snapped her fingers. "You cannot disobey me. You know that."

Still no tingle of magic. I stood outside the gate. Was that why? Or was it the weakening enchantment? Either way, Madame seemed oblivious to the loss of her power.

"I can—" I faked a gasp. "I can resist! Long enough—"

"Of all the—" The keys finally emerged.

I shoved the box with the rose into my skirt, effectively hiding it. As Madame's keys jangled, and the largest clanked into iron, I slipped the lid off by feel and clutched the rose.

The rose with paper-dry petals.

I pushed it into a pocket, fumbled the lid back on, and let the box tumble to the ground, back into visibility. At the same time, I gasped and squatted, trying to sound like I'd fallen. My skirt, heavy and damp, darkened the gravel and I grinned, for the mark made my act all the more believable.

The gate creaked. I lifted my damp skirts from the ground and used the creak to mask my footsteps.

Madame hadn't hooked the keys back on her hip. She strode forward, brazen and confident, to the servant who had collapsed under her power. The keys held aloft and visible, the gate's still singled out.

I grabbed and with a deft twist, wrenched them from her grasp.

Lady Marguerite cried out, but she reacted too slowly. The gravel scraped as she whirled around, but I'd already darted through the gate. I slammed it shut and thrust the key into the lock. The heavy tumbler fell.

I ripped the key free and tossed the ring behind me, toward the gardens. "I am sorry you will die alone, but that is how you chose to live."

With her insults growing ever dimmer behind me, I ran.



That had turned to a gale ceased the moment I crossed under the Rose Garden's archway. The air had gone stale and the roses' perfume was rotten. Bruised petals fell like rain. I stumbled past dying rosebushes, my leg numbed past pain, my bare foot most certainly bleeding. Dizziness prickled at my eyeballs. I squinted to see, for the colors had bled dark, despite the ever-lightening sky.

"Gautier?" I said. My voice, faint. I pushed myself deeper and broke through the final ring of bushes.

The marble lady watched death flutter around her. The ivy that formed her dress had shriveled to black, and yellow petals from her crown speckled the large midnight-blue mound at her feet. One stone hand was empty, the other held a withered, black shape. I pulled the royal rose from my pocket. The petals had withered entirely. Only the veins of gold pulsed with life, and weakly.

I summoned the last of my strength to take those final steps. Even as I replaced the rose, I fell to the ground.

The mound of darkness stirred, and Gautier rolled over. He wasn't dead. Not yet.

CHAPTER 33

“Gautier, can you hear me?” I pushed myself to my elbows and inched closer.

“Claudette...” Most of the gravel had left his voice, leaving rumpled velvet. I smelled nothing but decaying roses.

“Seline’s sister drugged her. I could not bring her—I tried.”

His head shifted so that he faced where I lay. His blue eyes opened: dull instead of piercing, searching without seeing. “You sound so weak.”

I laughed. “Dying does that to a girl.”

He grunted, and his voice strengthened. “You make fun to the last.”

“Of course. I am never serious when I should be.” I wiggled closer, desperate to touch him. The world had grown so dim, and I worried I only imagined him.

“I remember. When you are nervous.” Darkness moved as Gautier crawled to me. Arms enveloped me like a sigh. “You made it. I am sorry I did not save you.”

There was no heat in his embrace, no comfort. His breath upon my hair, my brow. So, so cold. I burrowed my face in the ruff of his neck. The ghost of cinnamon and musk. *He loves you desperately, and it terrifies him that you may not.* He had stayed away all those weeks during my recovery; he had taken my hand only after I had asked. Night after night he had wooed Seline. Like us all, he’d believed her to be the key. He had tried to love her. All to save me.

Damn the fairy! I began to laugh. I imagined the falling petals made more sound.

“Claudette?”

He must think me insane. But then, what was dafter than a maid daring to love a prince? I giggled again. “Sibyla failed.”

His head lifted toward the statue. Kind of him, to not speak the obvious.

“She cursed you so no one would love you.” I burrowed deeper, chasing the ghosts of cinnamon and heat. “But I love you. As a beast, as a prince, and most of all as a man. I do hope Sibyla hears. She can kill us, but I love you.”

The little warmth I’d found pulled away. A hand gripped my shoulder, the taloned thumb piercing a little. “You love me?”

“I didn’t crawl through a blizzard for Marie.” My words slurred together.

He made a sound, sort of a cross between a choke and a laugh. “I could not love Seline, because I love you. I dared not hope that you could—Claudette. Marry me.”

My edges felt blurred, like I was melding into him. Even the cold was fading. “I’m afraid... we are dying.”

His arm fell through me, and his voice grew frantic. “Claudette, I do not want to die with you. I want to marry you.”

So insistent. But my insides, if I still had them, buzzed with happiness. “Then... I will be your wife.”

I didn't hear his reaction. I heard nothing. I saw nothing. No sight, no smell, not even the cloying decay of the petals. I drifted, partly amused at the fact that I was aware of oblivion, and partly resigned to the hopelessness I'd apparently experience in the void.

I loved Gautier, and he loved me, but it was not enough. I had not expected my love to matter to Sibyla. My whole life, I'd been overlooked. At the orphanage, as a servant. Lame. Low. So few, so precious few, had ever truly seen me. Marie. Seline. Gautier.

Gautier loved me, and for me, that was more than enough.

Then it occurred to me: My thoughts seemed to babble more than they should in oblivion. And... I breathed deep in the nothingness. Roses. Sweet, heady. Roses... and cinnamon.

"Claudette." A deep, velvety voice. "Open your eyes."

I did. Icy grass prickled my arms and neck. Before me, a wall of green ivy... on a statue. Like a dress. Above her, gray clouds cloaked the sky. A single pink petal fluttered in my vision and landed on my cheek. Someone brushed it off.

My breath came faster. Someone had seen it. Someone had seen the petal as it lay against my cheek. Strong, human fingers had brushed my skin. I lifted my hand. Pale, young, calluses on the fingertips from too many years scrubbing. A larger hand grasped my wrist and pulled me upright.

"I'm... I'm visible," I said. I stared down at a dry, perfect gown of deep amethyst.

"Yes," said the man, his voice full of amusement. "And I am human."

My amazement shifted from my visibility to the man standing before me. Broad shouldered, medium build. The golden brocade he wore set off the highlights in his honey-colored hair. I tilted my head to study his face. Tears slid down his cheeks. He had not mentioned the solid jaw which he would jut out when he felt stubborn. He had not mentioned how the sight of him would melt my heart.

"Gautier," I breathed.

He gazed at me with those intense blue eyes. They took in my hair, my face, my everything, my *me*. I laughed with pure joy. His laughter joined mine, deep and rich, velvet without the gravel. He moved with the speed of a lion and pulled me close. His heat washed over me as he kissed me, his human lips as soft as his embrace was strong. The musk had disappeared; he smelled only of cinnamon. I threaded my fingers through his silky human hair, relishing the feel of him.

He broke the kiss and left me giddy. My legs felt like jelly, but his arms kept me upright.

"Why didn't you tell me you loved me earlier?"

"I tried to, before Lady Alys attacked," he said. His face flushed. "I never found the courage again. And you? You felt free to scold me in my own castle. Why couldn't you tell me you loved me?"

I blushed, too. "I didn't think my love could break the spell. I'm a parlormaid and the worst choice for an enchanted prince."

"Oh, Claudette." Gautier lifted my chin so I'd look him in the eyes. "You're a woman. A brave, spirited woman whom I love and admire."

Tears slipped down my cheeks, and he brushed them away with his thumb.

"How sweet," came a hard voice full of time and magic. A cold wind cut through our embrace. A woman stepped out from behind the lady statue as if she had been there the entire time. Her lips formed a smile of sharp points and angles, accenting already severe cheekbones. Streaks of silver glinted in hair blacker than night. Her straight, slate-gray gown shimmered like mist. Bony fingers gripped the

statue's shoulder as if it were a possession; a possession she intended to crush.

I shivered. Gautier's arms stiffened around me as if he feared the woman might spirit me away.

He jerked his head in a nod. "Lady Sibyla."

"You're supposed to bow to a lady," she said, using the words I once had. Her black eyes sparkled, but not with mirth. "Though, trembling in fear before a fairy is acceptable."

She glided toward us, and Gautier did tremble. But I knew my beast; he trembled with rage.

The fairy's grin could cut stone. "Feel gratitude, prince. I should take offense at your choice. Fortunately, my daughter married an emperor worth ten of you. Thus, for the past half century, amusement has replaced revenge, for nothing entertains a fairy more than a surprise. They are a rarity, surprises."

"I am happy to please," he said through clenched teeth.

Sibyla laughed like a crack of ice. "Ah, the sparks of anger in your eyes. The beast still lives. Yet, it is tempered." Her gaze flickered over me. "To think, an invisible, snippy nothing won the beast's heart. Entertaining, indeed."

My face prickled. "You speak as if this has been a game." Gautier pressed his fingers into my waist, but fear mingled with injustice gave me poor judgment. "You were going to destroy an entire castle of people over an insult!"

Her black eyes bored into me, and I swallowed. "Parlormaid, show respect. Do you think I *want* him to walk away? I *could* lash out from wounded pride. It's not often that fairies make oversights. But..." Her mouth flattened in a humorless smile. "I am bound by my own words. *You must marry for love*. A pity that I didn't outright state that said love had to come from outside the castle's wall."

"So... I'm free?" Gautier said.

"If you call marrying that pert thing in your arms freedom," Sibyla said with obvious disgust. "Are you certain in your choice? There is a southerner not far from here. Beautiful and exotic, demure and polite. Seline would make a fine queen. Your buxom maid still glares at me. You'll never be able to keep a peaceful court."

"I am certain in my love," Gautier said without hesitation. Then he proved himself as suicidal as I by grinning. "It will be amusing, Claudette keeping the courtiers honest."

The fairy laughed at that, and though the sound was not filled with malice this time, we still cringed at the power and lack of human warmth.

Sibyla clapped her hands and the air shuddered. The marble statue flashed a brilliant white. The golden crown of roses glowed, and her ivy gown fluttered in the sudden warm breeze. The withered black roses expanded with a sigh, turning deep purple and gold. Colors throughout the garden grew vibrant as the sun broke through the clouds. Faint shouts of joy came from beyond the Rose Garden's wall, from the castle.

"It will take time for things to return to normal," Sibyla said. She waved a hand. "Century-old magic doesn't just whiff away. Which may be for the best. You will have a few months to adjust to your human and visible forms. If you have not guessed, my prince, your father died long ago. You are now king. As the fog lifts from the people's minds, the descendants of the former courtiers will find you."

"Thank you," Gautier said.

"See how my enchantment has improved you? I do not think I have ever heard you say those words before." She chuckled as Gautier's lips thinned. "Yes, your temper has amused me. Perhaps I will look in from time to time to see the scandals Claudette creates."

She gave a wink, making my stomach plummet.

Sibyla dissolved into the very air. We waited, barely breathing, and the minutes dragged by. Finally Gautier exhaled, his head sagging forward.

"We're alive," he said as if he could not quite believe it.

"For a lifetime." I took in the Rose Garden's beauty: from the bushes to the pool to the statue that held the kingdom's treasures. "Provided we hold our tongues around fairies."

Gautier chuckled. "We may be doomed."

He took my hand, and together we left the Rose Garden. Outside the bloom-covered walls, a breeze stirred: gentle and not cold, yet no longer full of newness and spring. The clouds had vanished with the fairy's spell. Blue sky stretched overhead; the muted blue of dawn, tinted with the grayness of autumn. The eternal spring would vanish with the spell, not 'whiffing away' in a day, but gradually, as our world merged with the winter outside. There'd no longer be strawberries in season with apples. There would no longer be walks in the lavender every day. There would be *change*.

"The sleepers are awake," Gautier said as we followed the paths toward the castle. "They are leaving the South Hall. I can feel them, but... it's vague. I can feel people, but I can only identify a few individuals."

"Do you feel Lady Marguerite?" I asked, the gravel crunching under my feet as I halted.

He closed his eyes, face tilted toward the castle. As he concentrated, it struck me again how perfect he seemed, and how I'd always see hints of my Beast in his features. Strength thrummed through his bones, softened by humanity.

Gautier twisted his body as he searched the grounds. Finally, he opened his eyes. "I can pick out Lord Antoine. Barely. He's in the South Hall, likely helping those confused by their awakening. Lady Marguerite is nowhere."

"I locked her outside the gate." I hurried to tell him what happened, and his eyes flashed as I related the story. Had he been present when Madame had denied me entry, she would have paid dearly.

"I never could feel a presence outside the walls," he said after I'd finished. His anger made him shake. "Marguerite can stay there for now."

I burned with curiosity. Madame hadn't had Gautier's breath to give her protection outside the walls. It was a short time, likely too short a time to freeze to death, and yet... had Sibyla remembered her when she lifted the spell? A little apprehension mingled with my curiosity, for though Madame had been heartless, she'd always acted for the castle. In the end, she'd done what she thought best.

Later, after his fury lessened, Gautier would send someone for Lady Marguerite. They wouldn't find her. Perhaps she'd known the fate that awaited her, in the dungeon with Alys, and she'd run away. Perhaps Sibyla had missed her and she'd remained invisible. Perhaps she'd simply faded to oblivion. We'd never know. But the villagers, as knowledge of their castle and king replaced superstitions of spirits, would always believe a section of our woods was haunted.

Gautier frowned in the direction of the gate. The harsh fury in his brow had mellowed to something like puzzlement. "There's... I cannot make out... I am going to miss some aspects of the enchantment, I fear."

Lilac bushes shielded the curve in the path. I listened, hard, and realized that my hearing wasn't as sharp as it had been hours earlier. "Someone's running. Lady Marguerite?"

Gautier shook his head. "I should still be able to feel her, in the same way I can feel Lord Antoine."

The Someone rounded the corner, her green dress shining like an emerald, her half-up dark hair flying behind her.

Seline skidded to a stop. She recognized my dress, and absolute joy lit her face. “Claudette! You’re visible!”

We attacked each other with hugs, squealing like puppies.

“You’re awake!” I said.

At the same time, Seline spoke in a rush. “I was lying on the floor and everything was dark, and then I was standing inside the gate and I had to find you!”

We pulled apart, laughing, and tears streamed down both our cheeks.

“Where is Beast—” Seline began, but then she saw Gautier. Her mouth formed an *O* before spreading in a beautiful smile, and she swept a deep curtsy. “Your Highness.”

Gautier hesitated, clearly uncomfortable, so I cleared my throat. “A gentleman always bows when greeting a lady.”

His brow furrowed as he gave me a Look.

Seline straightened with a giggle. “Oh, my goodness. Now that I hear you, you *are* impertinent, Claudette. Wickedly, delightfully impertinent.”

Gautier’s glare softened, and he reached to pull me close. “Yes. Yes, she is.”

We returned to the castle, his arm around me, Seline skipping as she asked thousands of questions. As we came into view, another figure ran toward us: a woman in drab servant clothing with a soft, round face and sweet brown eyes. Her joy gave her the boldness to approach her prince. Marie waved both arms in the air as she ran, shouting, “*You did it, Claudette! Oh look, we are visible at last!*”

Others saw us, as well: lower servants and uppers clustered without respect to class. Even a few noblemen who had made their way from the South Hall. Marie reached us, breathless, flinging a hug around Seline and me. But none of the others came. None dared approach His Highness and Lady Seline and the unknown lady.

It has always been this way and it always will.

My whole life, I’d been invisible, overlooked. A lame orphan, a floor drudge, a parlormaid, an enchanted servant. Soon I’d be a queen; now that was a giddy thing to believe. I’d be a queen, and I’d still be invisible. Hidden behind my title, overlooked because of rank.

Except by Marie, who had loved me like a sister, despite the other servants’ hostility.

Except by Seline, who had loved me without being able to see me.

Except by Gautier.

As Seline, Marie, and I ended our embrace, his gaze met mine over Marie’s shoulder.

They say when two gazes meet, souls mingle and hearts touch without words. My breath caught, choked with emotions that I never could name. But that was fine, for he shared them. With a gaze we shared our pride, our stubbornness, our loneliness. We shared acceptance and love.

In that moment and forever, he was not a prince. I was not a servant.

He was Gautier, and I was Claudette, and we loved each other, each other’s tempers and snark and music and laughter. Our hearts were treasures few would ever behold, and that was fine. We saw each other. Always.

CONNECT WITH AMITY

Thank you for reading *Unseen Beauty*! Join my bimonthly newsletter (no spam!) to find out about my upcoming releases and get behind-the-scenes tidbits about my books. I'm swamped with writing and chasing my four kids, so I don't do social media or up-to-date blogging. This is the best way to connect!

[Amity's Newsletter](#)

Also, would you consider leaving an honest review for *Unseen Beauty*?

[Amazon \(USA\)](#), [Amazon \(non USA\)](#) and/or [Goodreads](#)

Reviews don't just help authors, they help readers like you find a book they luuv (or avoid a book that will make them cranky). It only takes a sentence or two! Think a quick text to a friend, not a dreaded book report.

HERE'S A SAMPLE!

BLUE FIRE

Note: Contains swearing but no f-words. Coming of age epic fantasy. Clean romance. Also... dragons!

Chapter One

I had run out of places to hide.

This morning, a city had seemed like the smart answer. Small villages like the one I'd been raised in, they noticed strangers. They'd report me to the local noble right off. But a city? It had people. Too many people, I'd hoped, and no one would notice a girl working in a stable or in a kitchen. Work hard, work quiet, keep my head down, and keep my emotions in check. Simple. Flawless.

Except I didn't know cities. I didn't know that narrow streets were bad. That narrow streets had building butting up against building, too tight to squeeze between. That if you picked the wrong one of these streets-that-weren't-streets, yes, you may not be noticed by other people, but you might end in up a courtyard smelling of rotting cabbages with *no way out*.

"Pigshit," I said after I rounded the corner. The enclosed area only had knee-high crates to hide behind. Only two of the four walls had doors. I hurried to the first—locked.

As my fingers released the handle, the sound of footsteps came around the corner.

It's over.

I'd only been running a week. A whole week, never seeing a single noble in the countryside. Then, just inside the gates of the first city I'd come to, a brown cloak had begun to follow me. Then two. And while cloaks weren't disturbing—near twilight, many people wore cloaks—I'd spotted the glint of red at the cloaked figure's side.

Not a sword. Scarier than a sword. A ring. A *gemmed* ring.

Only nobles were allowed to wear gemstones.

"I seem to be lost," I said. I turned around and tried a smile. "If you'll excuse me—"

The first figure raised a hand, and I faltered. He wore a ring, yes, but his hand wasn't the sun-starved shade of the nobility. He was the shame shade as me—the dusky brown of farmers and lower traders and all those who work outside, and that didn't make sense.

"My king, he wants to talk to you," he said.

I frowned deeper. He was almost impossible to understand. The words, too thick on his tongue.

"Adara, yes?" he continued. "Mage of blue fire?"

"Only nobles have magic." My mouth tasted drier than the dirt of last season. "You're mistaken. If you will let me pass..."

The setting sun had dimmed the courtyard, but there was enough light to catch the gleam of teeth under his hood. His companion shifted forward until the exit was blocked completely.

"Eyes like ocean," the first said. "Girl. Fifteen, sixteen? From Stoneyfield."

With dismay I leaned against the cool stone beside the doorway. Word must have gotten out about my foster parents' hut. It had been an *accident*. Lily and Garth had gotten out in time, but it didn't matter. Their home, ash. The long-held suspicions, confirmed.

"I don't want to die," I whispered.

The cloaked man began to *laugh*. "Die? Talking isn't die. My king, he honors blue mage. Not stupid like Dragerian king. Magic is magic and who cares where from."

With that, he lifted the hood.

He was a rain-forsaken *Carthesian*. Blue and purple lines of a nonsensical tattoo covered half his face. No wonder he'd worn a cloak—every guard in the city and every noble besides would have come to kill him had he shown those tattoos. The Carthesian tribes had raided Drageria since before time. Stoneyfield wasn't on the border, but it was far enough north that ambitious tribes raided it once a generation. First One knew I wouldn't talk to any of them.

His friend had pushed back his hood as well, revealing an identical tattoo. Both sported close-cropped dark hair and dark eyes, but the speaker was taller. He took a step forward.

"Stay back!" I yelled.

He froze. "Fear? No fear. Honor. My king—"

"Carthesia doesn't have a king," I said. I'd heard the rumors, though, that the desert tribes had united. They had even gotten the banished dragons to join them. Before he could argue, I added, "Even if it did, I'm not an ox-brain. I'm not going to the desert with you."

He chuckled again and took another step. My heart began to pound so loud I was surprised no one heard it on the other side of the wall.

"Peace—"

"Peace? When you started a war?" I said.

He took another step.

My heart beat faster. "Stop! I won't go—"

He stopped. So did I. For I'd thrown up my hands and, around my fingers, blue fire twisted.

I had no blighted idea how I was doing it.

"Shhh," the Carthesian said. Then he spoke something in a harsh tongue to his companion. "Think. What Drageria give you? If you no come, with me, then where do you go?"

"Wherever I want," I said, but it wasn't true. Nobles killed halfblooded babies. It was doubtful they'd welcome one as an adult. The speaker, and his buddy, slid another step forward. "I said stop!"

A crate beside me burst into blue ash. A smell like scorched sewage wafted from the remains.

Red sparkles appeared between the Carthesians and me, like a curtain. I waved my hands at it, but the blue flames vanished instead of growing. When they did, the speaker's friend began to laugh and the curtain grew closer.

First One, please get me out of this. I still resented my deity, for everything had been fine until I'd prayed at the village's altar, but no one else was going to save me. *Bring the blue fire back. Make the Carthesian's spell fizzle. Anything!*

I didn't really expect the prayer to work. Just like I didn't expect the Dragerian to enter the courtyard.

Even in the dim light, the *massive* part of him was impossible to miss. He towered a head taller than the larger Carthesian. Better than his height, however, was the lattice of black fire between his hands—that and the absence of a tattoo above his white-flecked beard.

I nearly sobbed with relief. I'd worry about him being a noble after we lived.

The speaking Carthesian noticed the direction of my gaze; he spun as the Dragerian threw the lattice into the air. The magic enveloped his friend and brought the Carthesian to the ground. The speaker growled something and the red curtain squeezed together and zipped toward the Dragerian as a lightning bolt. The noble batted it away, but his eyebrows raised at his smoking sleeve. The magic had broken through. He met the next two bolts of lightning with black ones of his own.

Fear melted into awe. Never, *ever*, had I seen something so beautiful. Red and black clouds swirled in a storm of lightning. Bursts of wind swept through the courtyard and pulled at the hairs that had escaped my braid. The power thrummed through the air as crates rose without hands to lift them and raced toward the Dragerian.

Cold sweat broke out on my neck as my eyesight blurred. Not again. Not...

Ghostly forms began to float over the real ones as the vision began.

I am bathed in blue fire. Blackness halos my enemy as he advances and chairs float into the air. I'll never be able to push them back. Instead I form a wall of fire as they begin to hurtle toward my head...

The vision vanished. I fell to the cobblestones. The battle waged on, the Dragerian exploding one crate after another. White may have flecked his dark beard and his close-cropped hair, but the Dragerian looked as if he could fling spells all night.

My fingers brushed against a loose cobblestone. *Let's not gamble on all night.* I pulled the stone from the ground and hurled it. The stone struck the Carthesian in the back of the head and he crumpled to the ground.

The noble flicked his wrist and an orb of black vanished. He nodded at the unconscious man and spoke with a voice so deep the air rumbled. "Creative."

"Normal," I managed.

He chuckled. "Well spoken."

The noble went to the unconscious man and stooped to check his wrist. Black ropes formed out of air and wrapped themselves around the Carthesian. His enemy secured, the Dragerian turned, cursed. The other Carthesian had slunk past him and away without either of us knowing.

"We need to leave," the noble said. "Before he finds reinforcements. Come, I have a carriage waiting."

He gestured, expecting me to follow.

I didn't move.

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MORE FROM AMITY

Requiem

YA Dark Fantasy

“He will help you live.”

In a war-torn land, only a song can banish the dead. Can Kaedra sing through her grief, or will she give in to anguish?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I do not write historical fantasy. I love history—I have a bachelor's with a focus on Japanese medieval history—but perhaps because of my degree, I'm paralyzed when it comes to writing in a historical setting. Trying to adhere to my own standard of accuracy stifles my ability to tell the story. Therefore, my general approach is to research everything I'm unsure about, and then I toss my notes behind me and write a fantasy that hopefully is believable but certainly not real.

For *Unseen Beauty*, this meant months researching the servant class. I studied the different attitudes in England, France, and Germany. Time periods ranged from Shakespearean to Victorian. I found it fascinating. Sometimes servants were highly visible, dressed lavishly to show off wealth. Other times, servants were to be hidden so their very appearance would not offend those born of 'better' blood. To make eye contact could result in immediate dismissal. As far as treatment, occasionally servants were treated like family; they could be considered property; they could be a sort of middle class (at least you're not a common farmer). A position could be hereditary; it could have the turnover of a fast-food dump with a bad manager. Even the servants' living conditions varied. One century they may be stuffed in the dark, dank bowels of the home, only for them to migrate by the next century to the poorly heated and cooled attic.

In the end, I never found quite the set of circumstances I wanted for my story. I took what I needed from where/when it occurred and mooshed the elements together. Add imagination.

I took an even looser approach with location. There is no historical fact in Gautier's castle—though I did make a rough map of it, so it is true to itself. Gautier does not live in a specific kingdom. *Unseen Beauty* is set in that lovely European-ish fairytale-ish land for all its benefits and downfalls. To provide a sense of national identity, I did pull all the names from French origin (any errors are my own). The names in Seline's family are pulled (I think? Where did I toss those notes?) from Mediterranean sources so they sound 'foreign' from the others, and the sisters' names all deal with the heavens.

In the end, Sibyla meddled with everything, so any and all errors fall on her. Just don't say so aloud.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A dream originates in the heart, but many help it along its journey to reality. I owe many people thanks. I will try to remember all of you, but I'm currently pregnant and only functioning with half myself, so gently tell me if I missed you and know it wasn't intended.

First, Dave. My alpha reader, my encourager, my true love at first sight. You've held me during setbacks, rearranged life so I can create—Daddy Day once a week is the best blessing a writing mom can have. I have never met a husband so supportive of a writing career as you. I love you.

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Holly Lisle: *How To Revise Your Novel* transformed my career and taught me writing like nothing else. *Writing Discipline* is why I've managed to do anything at all with three small kids, and it inspired me to homeschool while maintaining a career; I decided if you could do it, I could figure it out, too. Now I have the best of all worlds.

To God, thank you for the dream. I am sorry for the temper tantrums along the way and the doubts. Thank You for Your endless patience, because I'm not always the best listener.

Last, to Mlle. Celestine, a chambermaid who lived long ago: Your diary, with your humor and snark and carefree spirit, shaped Claudette in a way no other could. I hope you found your happy ending and managed to stay out of jail.